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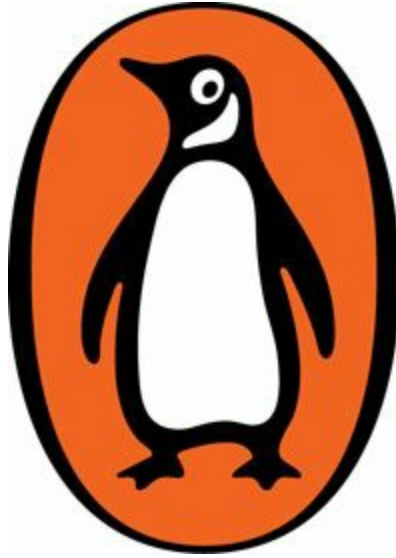


C L A S S I C S

DANTE

Paradiso

Translated by ROBIN KIRKPATRICK



Dante Alighieri

THE DIVINE COMEDY 3: PARADISO

*Translated and edited by
Robin Kirkpatrick*



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THE DIVINE COMEDY 3: PARADISO

Dante Alighieri was born in Florence in 1265 into a family from the lower ranks of the nobility. He may have studied at the university of Bologna. When he was about twenty, he married Gemma Donati, by whom he had four children. He first met Bice Portinari, whom he called Beatrice, in 1274, and when she died in 1290 he sought consolation by writing the *Vita nuova* and by studying philosophy and theology. During this time he also became involved in the conflict between the Guelf and Ghibelline factions in Florence; he became a prominent White Guelf and, when the Black Guelfs came to power in 1302, Dante was, during his absence from the city, condemned to exile. He took refuge initially in Verona but eventually, having wandered from place to place, he settled in Ravenna. While there he completed the *Commedia*, which he began in about 1307. Dante died in Ravenna in 1321.

Robin Kirkpatrick graduated from Merton College, Oxford. He has taught courses on Dante's *Commedia* in Hong Kong, Dublin and – for more than twenty-five years – at the university of Cambridge, where he is Fellow of Robinson College and Professor of Italian and English Literatures. His books include *Dante's Paradiso and the Limitations of Modern Criticism* (1987), *Dante's Inferno: Difficulty and Dead Poetry* (1987) and, in the Cambridge Landmarks of World Literature series, *Dante: The Divine Comedy* (2004). His own published poetry includes *Prologue and Palinodes* (1997), and currently he is working on a long poem (in five acts) entitled *Paradise Rag*.

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This volume is dedicated to Father Alban McCoy and the community of Fisher House, Cambridge. Translating and reading the *Paradiso* requires an unremitting attention to words and theological nuance. In Fisher House the issues that for Dante were always alive continue to live and produce their own exhilarating results.

Chronology

- 1224 Saint Francis receives the stigmata
- 1250 Death of Emperor Frederick II
- 1260 Defeat of the Guelfs at the battle of Montaperti, leading to seven years of Ghibelline domination in Florence
- 1265 Dante born, probably 25 May
- 1266 Defeat of Imperial army by the Guelfs and the French under Charles d'Anjou at the battle of Benevento
- 1267 Birth of Giotto; restoration of Guelf rule in Florence under the protection of Charles d'Anjou
- 1274 Deaths of Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure
- 1282 The influence of the guilds starts to grow in Florence
- 1283 Dante begins his association with the poet Guido Cavalcanti
- 1289 Dante fights at the battle of Campaldino; Florence, having defeated Arezzo and Ghibelline factions at Campaldino, begins to extend its supremacy over Tuscany
- 1290 Death of Bice (Beatrice) Portinari
- 1292 Dante compiles the *Vita nuova*
- 1293 *Ordinamenti di Giustizia* promulgated in Florence
- 1294 Election and abdication of Pope Celestine V; election of Pope Boniface VIII
- 1295 Dante enrolls in a guild
- 1296 For five years, Dante is actively involved in the political life of the Florence commune; *Rime Petrose* probably composed
- 1300 Dante elected to the office of prior; fictional date of the *Commedia*
- 1301 Crisis and *coup d'état* in Florence; Charles de Valois enters the city; return of Corso Donati; defeat of the White Guelfs by the Black Guelfs
- 1302 In his absence, Dante formally exiled and sentenced to death by the Black Guelfs
- 1303 Dante seeks refuge for the first time in Verona; death of Pope Boniface VIII
- 1304 Dante probably engaged until 1307 on the *Convivio* and the *De Vulgari Eloquentia*; birth of Petrarch
- 1305 Pope Clement V detained in Avignon
- 1307 Possible date for when Dante started the *Commedia*; accession of Edward II to English throne
- 1308 Henry VII of Luxembourg elected Holy Roman Emperor in Rome
- 1310 Dante writes his epistle to Henry: '*Ecce nunc tempus acceptabile*'; Henry enters Italy
- 1312 Possible (though much debated) date for when Dante started *De Monarchia*; Henry crowned Holy Roman Emperor
- 1313 Emperor Henry VII dies; Boccaccio born
- 1314 Dante begins living for six years in Verona, under the protection of Can Grande della Scala
- 1318 Dante in Ravenna: in close contact with Guido Novello da Polenta
- 1320 Dante in Latin verse correspondence with the humanist Giovanni del Virgilio; lectures at university of Verona: *Questio de Aqua et Terra*
- 1321 Dante dies in Ravenna, 13 September

Editor's Note

Dante called his poem a 'comedy'. Only in the sixteenth century was the now-familiar adjective 'divine' attached to Dante's original title, by readers impressed by the ambition of the work who were eager to enhance its reputation. For similar reasons this adjective has been kept on the cover of the present translation. However, there are good reasons, discussed in the introduction to *Inferno* (see below), for retaining Dante's less showy designation and, beyond the title page, it is this title that will be preserved.

The *Commedia* is a single poem of 100 cantos, subdivided into three parts, the *Inferno*, the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso*, each part constituting a *cantica*. The present translation appears in three separate volumes. The *Inferno* was published in 2006 and the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso* in 2007.

Each volume contains an introduction specific to the *cantica* within it, though in this final volume there is frequent crossreference to issues first raised in volumes 1 and 2. Volume 1, *Inferno*, contains a general introduction to the *Commedia* as a whole.

In a number of *terzinas* in the *Paradiso* Dante incorporates Latin phrases into his Italian text. Where these phrases are quotations from Latin authors or reflections of liturgical usage, the translation normally allows them to stand in Latin. Where a phrase is drawn from the technical vocabulary of scholastic philosophy, it is normally translated into English.

Commentaries and notes have been edited according to standard practice. However, the text of the translation – in an attempt to respond to the density and variety of Dante's poetic practice – frequently employs non-standard forms of punctuation and capitalization.

Introduction

PARADISO

In the final lines of the *Paradiso* Dante writes:

But now my will and my desire were turned,
as wheels that move in equilibrium,
by love that moves the sun and other stars.

Paradiso 33: 142–5

The *Commedia* is, in the end, a love poem. Divine existence expresses itself as love – as the creative love that is reflected in the variety and harmonious design of the physical universe, and in the wheeling motions of ‘the sun and other stars’. Correspondingly, human existence expresses itself in ‘will’ and ‘desire’ – in an intellectual appetite for the ultimate good and, equally, in an urge, which humans share with all other forms of life (whether intellectual, animal or even vegetative), to live as completely as is possible.

The *Paradiso* represents our existence as it would be if we fully acknowledged the influence that love exerts upon us. Of course, free will and desire can make us go disastrously astray. The *Inferno* offers tragic evidence of this. In the *Purgatorio*, however, Dante begins to express his characteristically confident understanding of human nature. Sin is not an ineradicable disease. It is simply a misconception or perversion of love. (See commentary on *Purgatorio* 16–18.) The ethical programme of the *Purgatorio* does not envisage any repression of human desire and freedom. Still less does the *Paradiso*. On the contrary, these two *cantiche* are concerned with the rediscovery of the human capacity for happiness, which, for Dante, will be realized when we are at last able to engage actively with all other beings in the created universe. In *Purgatorio* 16: 85–90, God is pictured as creating the universe and its human inhabitants for no reason other than a love of, and delight in, existence itself. (Compare *Paradiso* 2.9: 13–21.) In that perspective, sin – and any obsession with sinfulness – is a trivial distraction from a proper understanding of God’s intentions. Now, in the *Paradiso*, wholly free from any such obsession, Dante traces the implications of this

understanding, unfolding them for his reader, canto by canto, with an unfailing sense of discovery. Love, in the third *cantica*, is a condition of freedom in which finite beings recognize their relation to an infinite Creator, and are drawn by will and desire into constantly new perceptions and new forms of relationship.

Of crucial significance in the development of this vision is Dante's love for the Florentine woman Beatrice. She is the object of Dante's human love. As early as the *Vita nuova*— where Dante first spoke about Beatrice — the poet recognized that love, far from implying any ambition to control or possess, is best understood as an unconditional delight in the very existence of a particular person. From this derives Dante's constant desire to praise the perfections that all persons are capable of, wherever he may find them. But, as Dante's theology develops, so it becomes increasingly clear that human perfections are also reflections of the creative love of God. These perfections are most perfect when they point beyond themselves towards their ultimate source and, in doing so, demonstrate the living relationship between the finite and the infinite. The final cantos of the *Purgatorio* depicted Beatrice as the willing and necessary mirror of divine intentions, who through her very existence makes the light of God available to Dante's eyes. In the *Paradiso* her function develops still further. Here, she is repeatedly shown to articulate, on Dante's behalf, the theological doctrines of the Christian faith. It is for this reason that Beatrice is sometimes regarded as a symbol for the Church. The whole duty of the true Church is to sustain the affiliations between human beings and their Maker. But for Dante doctrine is never an end in itself. His concern in depicting his conversations with Beatrice is, rather, to pursue an enrichment of experience. That is the purpose of his own poetry in the *Paradiso*, to envisage the possibility of an ever greater depth of love between person and person — and to involve the reader likewise in the crescendo of that perception. Beatrice is thus the focus of some of the most lyrical, as well as most disciplined, poetry of the final *cantica*, as for instance in the conclusion to a particularly arduous piece of doctrine in the early *Paradiso*:

These waves came flooding from that holy stream
that rises at the source of every truth.
As such, they set my two desires to rest.
'Goddess, beloved of the loving First!
Your words in waves,' I said, 'flow into me.
They warm me through, and light me more and more.
No feeling I possess is deep enough
to make return to you, in grace for grace.
But He who sees — and can — will answer so.

I see full well that human intellect
can never be content unless that truth
beyond which no truth soars shines down on it ...'

Paradiso 4: 115–26

So the *Paradiso* explores what it means for the will and intellect to be in love. And the highest manifestation of such love, as the final canto of the work reveals, is the relationship that can exist, only and supremely, between intelligent beings. By that point in the poem, all lesser manifestations of reality dissolve to allow an unimpeded contemplation of thought, face and expression. Yet the mind in love, contemplating ‘the sun and other stars’, also feeds on the evidence of harmony and good order that displays itself in every other aspect of the created universe. Dante continues in the *Paradiso* to interest himself in a precisely scientific understanding of how the universe operates. Astronomy, meteorology, biology, optics and physics all contribute to this understanding. And outdated as Dante’s science may seem today, it was none the less the best science of its time, offered to his readers in the (sometimes ill-founded) expectation that an interest in such matters would focus and nourish our attention.

Order and harmony are thus central themes in the *Paradiso*. Indeed, as a means of finding a way into this sometimes difficult work, there is much to be said for acquainting oneself in the first instance with the sequence that runs from [canto 10](#) to [canto 14](#). Here Dante depicts a community of philosophers whose thinking has demonstrated the value of rational attention to the detail of the universal system. These are, of course, specifically *Christian* philosophers. They work (particularly Thomas Aquinas) within an environment of faith, inspired by the confidence that an ever more exact analysis of the created world will generate a form of human wisdom that participates ever more fully in the workings of divine wisdom. So, it is often important to distinguish Dante’s conception of rational inquiry from conceptions that have developed in subsequent centuries. (See commentary on *Paradiso* 10.) There is, however, no mistaking throughout the poem the enthusiasm with which Dante applies the principles he has derived from contemporary philosophy, or indeed the influence that his own particular form of rationalism exerts over its structure. In intellect and imagination, he ranges not only upwards towards God, but also around the whole created universe, seeking evidence of order in the universal system, observing the most intricate movements of the circling heavens. And his urgent desire is that the reader should follow him in this flight. So, at *Paradiso* 10:7–15,

Dante invites his reader to wonder at the precise adjustments in the movements of the sun which make life on earth possible:

Lift up your eyes, then, reader, and, along with
me, look to those wheels directed to that part
where motions – yearly and diurnal – clash.
And there, entranced, begin to view the skill
the Master demonstrates. Within Himself,
He loves it so, His looking never leaves.
Look! Where those orbits meet, there branches off
the slanting circles that the planets ride,
to feed and fill the world that calls on them.

The same appetite for order can discover similar manifestations in the smallest detail of ordinary experience – as, for instance, in the rippling circles that form when a glassful of water is tapped by a fingernail:

Centre to circle or circle to centre:
water in a round container moves like that,
depending where the rim is struck, inside or out.

Paradiso 14:1–3

Variety, however, is as important here as unity, and, in both poetic and philosophical terms, order, for Dante, implies the very opposite of conformity or constraint. The word ‘diverse’ is a *leit-motif* in the early cantos of the *Paradiso*. (See, especially, *Paradiso* 2: 58–141; also 8: 115–26 and 24:16–18.) And this theme is directly associated with Dante’s conception of creative love. Divine order creates and sustains the particularity of created things. In response, throughout the *Paradiso* the poet’s imagination displays an appreciation for the singular impact of light, sound and facial expression as much as it does for the geometry of the universe. So, for instance, the virtue of creative power shines in the heavens like light in a human eye:

the virtue, fused with body, shines throughout,
as joy does in the pupil of the eye.

Paradiso 2: 143–4

Or a crowd of saints approach Dante with the curiosity of fish in a fish pond seeking out food:

Compare: in fish pools that are still and clear,
the fish are drawn – as though they guess at food –
to anything that comes there from outside.
So now I saw a thousand splendours plus
drawing towards us. And in each was heard:
‘Look there! He’ll make our many loves grow more.’

Paradiso 5: 100–105

Or a great congregation of righteous monarchs rises through the heavens like a single lark:

A lark, as first it mounts through airy space,
soars upward singing but is silent then,
flush with the sweetness of its highest reach.

Paradiso 20: 73–5

The pursuit of order in the *Paradiso* involves, above all, concentrated attention. In that sense, it is identical to love. Love, in Dante's thinking, is not some easy or consoling sentiment. It is, rather, a capacity for the rigorous contemplation of particular things and persons – a delight in, and concern with, existences other than one's own which at times wholly obliterate one's self-concern. In this aspect, love can appear threatening as, in the face of new experience, we are called upon to surrender our familiar or established patterns of response. In the opening chapters of the *Vita nuova*, love first appears to Dante as 'terrifying', even destructive, in its impact. In the *Inferno*, likewise, the damned are judged by the appalling sentences written on Hell-Gate, which declare that Hell is as much the creation of divine love as of divine power and wisdom. (See *Inferno* 3: 1–9.) The damned are, for Dante, precisely those who have refused to surrender to 'new life', and the *Inferno* proceeds to picture the rejection of love as a rejection of the reality on which all other realities are founded. The *Paradiso* looks at the reverse side of this initially awe-inspiring conception. Love here is as demanding as ever it was. Now, though, Dante's surrender to these demands leads the self to an ever richer realization of its relationship with other forms of existence and to a fuller understanding of its own potentialities.

For instance, in [canto 30](#) Dante arrives at the sphere of the *Primum Mobile* – the Unmoved First Mover from which all movement in the universe derives – and sees for the first time the unmediated power of God's intellectual light:

I saw light form a river in full spate,
fire-dazzle-gilded, flowing through verges
painted afresh in colours of wonderful spring.
And rising from that flood, alive, were sparks
that everywhere alighted on the flowers,
like rubies set in gold encirclements –
then all, as though the perfumes made them drunk,
plunged in that swirling miracle once more.
And yet where one sank in, still more spun out.

Paradiso 30: 61–9

None of this, however, is to say that in the *Paradiso* Dante wholly

abandons the contempt he feels for those who cannot distinguish intelligent love from self-satisfaction and possessiveness. [Canto 30](#) itself concludes on a note of venomous anger:

The blind cupidity bewitching you
has made you all akin to little brats
who – famished, dying – still beat off their nurse.

Paradiso 30: 139–41

These lines point to the variety of tone and diction that remains as much a part of the *Paradiso* as it was of the two preceding *cantiche*. But the logic of this conclusion is also clear. It is sheer blindness that makes us fix our eyes on merely finite objects that offer immediate satisfactions, when our desires – which in themselves are good – have the capacity to seek an eternal object, and enrich themselves the more in doing so. Cupidity – the limitation of our desires to finite targets – is as perverse as the dying child who struggles against those who seek to nourish it. Surrender, on this understanding, involves no loss. It is through such surrender that the true vistas of intellect and desire are fully revealed.

In similar vein, at [canto 27](#), lines 25–7, Dante reserves a particular odium for the institution of the Church. The Church was established to be the vessel of charity in the world, sustaining the natural desires of all its children. But it has sunk itself now in cupidity and corruption. Dante counters this scandal with the equally scandalous words – intended to shake the Church out of its bewitchment – that he attributes to Saint Peter, who now declares that his successors have made a sewer of his holy place, ‘a shit hole/reeking of blood and pus’.

The alternative to such decadence is the increasingly refined and multifaceted perception of love that Dante’s own poem is devised to encourage. There is no point at which Dante, despite his tendency to polemic and disgust, suggests any radical opposition between our love of fellow human beings and the love of God. An indication of this is his very sparing use of the word *carità* (charity), in the theological sense of the love that binds the human being to the Creator. At times, Dante does use the word (and, given the alteration of its meaning in popular modern English, such instances will usually be registered in the translation by the Latin term *caritas*). Yet even in the final lines of the *cantica* quoted above, Dante prefers the word *amor*. This is the same word which, when uttered by the adulterous Francesca of *Inferno* 5, can produce a seductive, almost narcotic effect of rhythm and unfocused

emotion. None the less, the word *amor* is retained and accorded a place of honour in the beautifully balanced line with which the *Paradiso* concludes, expressing there the wholly unexpected intimacy that binds the created order to its Maker: *l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle*'. The desire for such intimacy may, where discernment fails, prove tragically frail. But the desires first expressed in *amor* are wholly redeemable. And if *amor* does, in Dante's language, surprisingly prevail over *caritas*, this simply confirms how deeply engrained in the detail of his text is Dante's very daring commitment to the potential goodness of our natural impulses.

It is further evidence of this that among the most notable figures featured in the early *Paradiso* at [canto 9](#), is the notorious scarlet woman of the thirteenth century, Cunizza da Romano (b. c. 1198). Cunizza here is numbered with the saints. But this does not lead her to any self-recrimination or pious dependence on divine mercy. Vivaciously, Cunizza 'forgives *herself*' for having been overcome by the astral influence of Venus. Her human ardour, her desire to live life to the fullest extent, has come to express itself in an act of self-knowledge in which she accepts, and even rejoices in, her own erotic inclinations and simultaneously recognizes what God's intentions were in first creating her. In Dante's *Paradiso*, we do not transcend humanity, but anticipate the final mystery in which God displays to the poet, at the climax of the poem, his own human face. Human reason cannot conceive how the divine may be at one with the human. It is, however, the redeeming implications of this mystery that Dante, as a love poet, has set himself to explore in the final part of the *Commedia*.

The Structure of the paradiso

To T. S. Eliot, the *Paradiso* was either intensely exciting or wholly incomprehensible. Dante, too, as he depicts himself in the *cantica*, often encounters the incomprehensible. For him, the excitement of this 'final work' lies in responding to the demands that thought and religious experience lay before him. The solutions that he finds at each successive phase of the poem are extraordinarily varied – and sometimes eccentric. So, too, in terms purely of poetic invention – in image and in language – the third *cantica* is undoubtedly the most intense and experimental of the three parts of the *Commedia*. The narrative is not what we expect a narrative to be. The

characters Dante imagines here are not characters in any merely psychological or novelistic sense of the word. And the experiences that he recounts may be at the very limits of what we can imagine to be possible. For all that, underlying the exhilarating originality of the work are structural and linguistic elements that Dante has been developing coherently since the opening of the *Inferno*. It is, therefore, convenient at the outset to review some of the main features of the *cantica*, emphasizing at every point that the reader of this part of the *Commedia* need not suppose that the Dante of the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio* has deserted his original plan or in any way relinquished the inventiveness that, from the first, so distinguishes his writing.

As in the first two *cantiche* of the *Commedia*, so in the *Paradiso* the foundation of Dante's narrative is located, first of all, in the highly structured plan of the work, and in the invention of a precisely visualized landscape – here, star-scape – which provides a clear but constantly changing setting for the conversations, encounters and doctrinal discussions of each particular episode. This aspect of Dante's art is easily seen in the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio*, where the topographical circumstances of his climb, first downwards, then upwards, contribute a wealth of images and situations to the development of his intellectual story. Yet at first glance – or even second glance, if certain familiar prejudices are allowed to prevail – it may not appear that the *Paradiso* follows suit. After all, religious literature is full of other worlds in which the variety and complexity of the natural environment are discarded in favour of pious imaginings and monotonously spiritual delights. But only those who choose to speak of the *Paradiso* as 'a symphony of music and light' – without, perhaps, having read the poem itself – are likely to view Dante's vision of Heaven in such a light.

Just as the transition from *Inferno* to *Purgatorio* involves a dramatic alteration of perspective and mode of vision, so, too, does the move from the second *cantica* to the third. In canto I of the *Paradiso* Dante is still in the Earthly Paradise, where in the final six cantos of the *Purgatorio* a densely populated scene had unrolled, overflowing with physical sensations, liturgical processions and visionary theatre. At a stroke, this scene is forgotten and attention falls on two figures alone – Dante and Beatrice – both shooting heavenwards in single-minded concentration on the planetary spheres. But these spheres, through which Dante's ascent will now be achieved, are themselves astral bodies, visible in all their variety of movement and

colouration to the human eye, from the moon as far as the ‘Fixed Stars’ of the constellations. Only in the last four cantos of the *Paradiso*, which describe the Empyrean – or the pure light of God’s presence, beyond these heavens – does Dante seek to imagine any direct encounter with God. This phase of the poem, as will soon be seen, demands special consideration. But for at least twenty-seven cantos of the *Paradiso*, Dante exploits both the orderliness and variety of observable physical phenomena, as he did in the pit of Hell and on the mountain of Purgatory, drawing on these phenomena to provide the metaphors and dramatic action with which to enliven his philosophical concerns.

The cosmos as Dante depicts it in his final fiction is the universe that was described by Aristotle and Ptolemy. The earth is its central point, and around the earth the planets circle on spherical tracks of crystalline material which are tuned so as to give out the perfectly harmonious music of the spheres. As the centre of this planetary system, the earth is fixed as the lowest and most constricted point in the cosmos. (See the introduction to *Inferno*, pp. 446–81, and in this volume the plan of Paradise, p. lxxxiv.) But once Dante moves away from the imprisoning force of the earth’s gravity, he acquires ever greater freedom of movement and is stimulated by an ever-increasing desire to rise still higher.

The journey itself is divided into four major phases, each of which displays its own characteristic theme, narrative tempo and imaginative colouration. The first phase, running from [canto 1](#) to [canto 9](#), depicts the spheres of the Moon, Mercury and Venus. Following the logic of this system with all his usual precision and scientific acumen, Dante realizes that the Sun, as it circles the earth, must cast a conical shadow into the universe. He calculates that the point of this shadow extends as far as Venus. On arriving at the Sun itself, Dante passes beyond this shadow and, at [cantos 10–22](#), visits the four great heavens of the Sun, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn, each of which possesses its own particular form of luminescence. Then, at the conclusion of [canto 22](#), Dante enters the constellation of Gemini, which is his own birth sign, and remains in the Heaven of the Fixed Stars until, in [canto 27](#), he enters the sphere of the *Primum Mobile*, the unmoved First Mover, and remains there until [canto 30](#). The point of contrast here concerns motion. The Sun, Jupiter, Mars and Saturn may be beyond the shadow of the earth, but they are still visibly moving. The Fixed Stars also move. But their motion is all but imperceptible, and they are ‘fixed’ in that the relation of star to star within

any constellation is immutable, maintaining always the same pattern in the sky. It is by virtue of this stability that the Fixed Stars can offer guidance to the mariner or traveller navigating by an astral map, and provide a measure for the movements of the lower planets. In addition, Dante – who was, like Aquinas, a believer in astrological influences – imagines that the stars can transmit specific powers and virtues to the substellar cosmos, in accordance with the providential plan of the Divine. The Fixed Stars stand, therefore, at a nodal point between the unchanging design of God's eternal purpose and the lower spheres in which motion displays itself in flux and of increasing uncertainty of orientation. Finally, in the realm of created order there revolves the *Primum Mobile*. This sphere is no more visible than the black holes of which modern astronomers theorize. By hypothesis, Dante, following Aristotle's astronomy, sees the *Primum Mobile* as the motive force in all the movements of the physical universe. Itself unmoving, this unmoved First Mover (not to be confused with God) sustains and regulates – as Dante argues in his earlier work the *Convivio* 2: 14, 15–17 – 'the daily revolutions of all the heavens as a result of which they are able to receive and transmit here below the influence of their every part'. Without the action of the *Primum Mobile*, 'there would be neither night nor day. There would be no week, month or year. The whole universe would be out of joint, and the proper movement of the other heavens would exist to no purpose.'

Dante's decision to adopt this carefully drawn map of the cosmos as the frame for his final journey argues a continuing confidence in the rational order of things and in the value of physically observable phenomena. For two-thirds of its duration, the *Paradiso* is concerned with a vision of nature as it was perfectly intended to be rather than with any direct representation of the divine. Of course, the science that underlies this vision has long since been discredited, but it was the best science of Dante's own day, and one of the reasons why explanatory notes are now needed at many specific moments in the third *cantica* is that Dante refers to the field of astronomical learning with a precision and technical relish that in modern circumstances might only be paralleled in the pages of some scientific journal. At the same time, Dante's enduring attention to the smallest detail of the created universe ensures that the *Paradiso*, at least as much as the earlier *cantiche*, celebrates – usually in the form of simile and comparison – the brilliance and innocence of terrestrial phenomena. The *Paradiso* is studded throughout with the most lucid and varied references to objects and events observable in our natural

world.

The commitment that Dante shows in the *Paradiso* to reason and the realm of nature is not confined to the practice of scientific observation, but extends to an analysis of and delight over – the manifold ways in which human beings can bring their rational and moral powers to perfect expression. Each planetary heaven provides an arena in which Dante can locate those historical figures that he wishes to applaud for the exercise of some specific ethical or intellectual skill. For instance, in the Heaven of the Sun he encounters the Christian philosophers who (in common with Dante himself) devoted their lives to wisdom and the investigation of the created cosmos. Courage is the virtue celebrated in Mars, in Jupiter justice and in Saturn temperance. Wisdom, courage, justice and temperance constitute the four moral virtues which were recognized initially by classical philosophers. For Dante, however, they also have an undiminished part to play in the Christian life and, though Virgil has now disappeared from Dante's side, the respect in which Dante holds the moral examples of the ancient world has clearly not been erased from his mind.

Dante's use of learned astronomical reference allows also for a great number of subtleties of nuance and variations of effect on an imaginative as well as an ethical level. For instance, in meditating on the shadow cast by the earth over the lowest three of the planetary spheres, the reader comes to realize that the apparent taint of earthly darkness is in fact no impediment to the enjoyment of beatitude. Here, Dante encounters those persons who have displayed, during their earthly lives, inconstancy, ambition or an excessive sex appetite. It may seem, therefore, just that they should be relegated to the shadowy fringes of Heaven. Yet 'relegated' proves not to be the word, and Dante's ethical vision here is seen to be particularly humane. Forgiving *themselves* for their own seeming deficiencies (as, above, we saw Cunizza do), the souls in these heavens are shown to participate unambiguously and fully in the order of eternal existence.

Or consider how Dante employs the imagery and symbolism of the Fixed Stars in [cantos 22–7](#). Only in these cantos does Dante begin to speak of the specifically theological virtues of faith, hope and charity. Where the moral virtues equip us to contribute fully to the life of the human community, the theological virtues allow us to proceed towards absolute fullness of life in the presence of God. But such doctrinal considerations are both supported and enhanced by being located in that region of the skies which offer visible signs

of an ultimate stability and influence residing in a power beyond our capacity to see or experience.

In the *Paradiso* Dante displays an undiminished appetite for visual invention. In the sequence running from [canto 10](#) to [canto 20](#) he constantly rings the changes on the effects of geometry, kinesis, choreography and calligraphy. In the Heaven of the Sun at [cantos 10–14](#), souls display themselves to him largely in the forms of circles, dancing and spinning. This circularity is replaced in the Heaven of Mars by rectilinearity, as the souls of the courageous, represented as scintillating lights, form vertical and horizontal columns in order to delineate the shape of Christ's cross. Geometry is replaced by words in the Heaven of Jupiter, where the just rulers in their thousands firstly sky-write the phrase '*Diligite Iustitiam*' ('Love Justice') across the heavens and then transform themselves into the single shape of an Imperial Eagle (*Paradiso* 18: 91–9). Finally, in the Heaven of Saturn at [cantos 21–2](#), rectilinearity and circularity combine as Dante imagines the souls, in the form of multitudes of spinning millwheels of light, descend a ladder whose summit disappears into the highest reaches of the Heaven of the Fixed Stars. And if movement is varied in this way, so too are the voices of the figures who perform these movements. The tone of Saint Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225–74) in [canto 13](#) is both intellectually alert and illuminated (rather unexpectedly) by common sense. That of the Christian warrior Cacciaguida degli Elisci (1090–1147) in [cantos 15–17](#) is distinguished both by passion and by archaic courtesy. No single voice speaks at all in Jupiter, only the great communal voice of the eagle. The speech of the ascetic Saint Peter Damian (c. 1007–1072) at [canto 21](#), lines 113–35, is strained, intense and polemical – reflecting in part the abrasive rhetoric which characterized his historical letters of reproof to cardinals and popes.

The *Paradiso*, then, is no less rigorously and imaginatively structured than the *cantiche* that preceded it. But, in common with the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, its narrative is impelled by an exploratory and inquiring spirit, calling upon both the author and the reader to test themselves constantly against new challenges to thought and vision. At [canto 4](#), lines 130–32, Dante famously celebrates doubt as the aspect of our thinking that drives us into an ever deeper appreciation of the truth.

Born of that will, there rise up, like fresh shoots,
pure doubts. These flourish at the foot of truth.
From height to height, they drive us to the peak.

But doubt in the third *cantica* is less a matter of anxiety or confusion than of surprise, wonder or delight (frequently expressed in words such as *ammirazione* which are associated in the Italian with *mirare* and *miracolo*, denoting, almost untranslatably, an intent and intelligent concentration on the meaning of some phenomena or argument). For Dante, the intricacies of interpretation required to read the divinely created universe are not a stumbling block but a source of intellectual pleasure, registered frequently in the hilarity with which Beatrice accompanies her authoritative explanations of this or that doctrinal crux, as, for instance, in [canto 4](#), lines 115–17.

One such case – which has often been regarded as a stumbling block, at least for the modern reader – is the extended discussion in the second half of [canto 2](#) of why there should be dark patches on the surface of the moon: are the patches on the moon the result of varying densities in the same material, or are they produced by two differing *types* of material? There can be no doubt that Dante wishes to get his science straight on this matter. He has already attempted an explanation in the *Convivio*. He now undertakes (under the guidance of Beatrice) to correct his earlier hypothesis. As the commentary on this canto argues, a proper understanding of the question contributes directly to a developing theme in the *Paradiso* of difference and diversity. The cosmos, in Dante's view, is designed to make diversity possible, and the variegation of black and white patches on the moon illustrate that. Yet readers are likely to balk at this passage if they take it too seriously. Far better, perhaps, to approach it as a playful conundrum or Dantean Rubik's cube, where, regardless of the practical outcome, curiosity and the exercise of intellectual skill are their own justification. The same might be said of the discussion in [canto 28](#) of the exact order in which the nine echelons of angels are ranked around God. Again, this is an intriguing question, yet it can hardly be that one's salvation should hang on an exactly correct answer. At the conclusion of the canto Dante speaks of how Pope Gregory I (c. 540–604), having proposed one ranking while still alive, arrives, at his death, in Heaven, only to discover immediately that he got the order wrong. Yet, assured of salvation, his response is not remorse but laughter at his own mistake.

Saint Gregory's laughter suggests something of why the *Paradiso* should be considered a comedy. The whole *cantica* is punctuated by moments at which the intellect, having done its best, is surprised into understanding by a realization of what, after all, it cannot do. A crucial element of this is Dante's depiction of himself as a bodily presence in an eternal world which is

supposedly only capable of admitting spiritual beings. The extent to which Dante consistently declares the body to be indissolubly a component of the human being as created by God has been discussed elsewhere. (See the introduction to *Inferno*, pp. liv–lv.) Furthermore, it is a central feature of Paradise, in Dante’s perspective, that it should not, after all, be the final resting place of human beings. What Dante sees in Paradise is simply the precursor of a condition that will only reach its final – surprising – resolution with the resurrection of the dead in their physical reality at the Last Judgement. But just as in the early cantos of the *Purgatorio* he devised a series of delicately comic scenes to disconcert all dualistic preconceptions concerning the body, so too in the first two cantos of the *Paradiso* Dante draws the reader’s attention to the oddity of his present physical position. The Dante who had displayed his pot-holing skills in Hell and his alpine agility on the slopes of Mount Purgatory now finds himself shooting bodily upwards towards the sphere of the Moon. Beatrice is pictured smiling with delight as she explains that, once free from the weight of sin, such levitations are entirely natural to the human being:

You ought not, if I’m right, be more amazed
at rising up than when you see a stream
descending from a hill’s crest to its base.
The wonder would, in your case be, when free
of all impediment, you sat down there –
as though live flames on earth were ever still.

Paradiso 1: 136–41

The reader may recall (though Dante does not, at this point) that Saint Peter was able, through faith, to walk for a moment or two on the waves of Galilee. Here in the *Paradiso* Dante records the faith, subverting all reason, that ensures he will move with the ‘love that moves the sun and other stars’, as one body in the galaxy of bodies that compose the constellations of the created cosmos. In [canto 2](#), lines 37–9, he describes – in parallel with the intellectual comedy of the moon spots discussion – a comic test to credulity, as he imagines how two bodies can occupy the same location in space. This is by, definition, impossible in terms of human understanding. Yet Dante’s body is now transhumanized – transfigured, transubstantiated – and can be at one with and yet distinct from the substance of the moon. And while such a union is unimaginable, Dante’s thought experiment leads the reader not to transcend or revolt against physical reality, but rather to appreciate contradictory sensations such as diamantine hardness, nebulous softness,

brilliance, polish, surface and penetration, in a more vivid way than any purely terrestrial description would have allowed:

To me it seemed a cloud now covered us,
shining and solid, dense and burnished clean, almost
as diamond when the sunlight strikes.

Paradiso 2: 31–3

So far attention has fallen upon the ways in which, from [canto 1](#) to [canto 29](#), Dante makes use of that plan of universal order and perfected nature which is represented by the orbiting spheres of the planetary heavens. From [canto 30](#) to [canto 33](#), however, he imagines a final advance into the Empyrean – which is to say into the direct presence of God, beyond all time, space or physical motion, a realm where the light is intellectual light and where the only measure is the measure of love, establishing relationships in charity between God and the persons that God has created. (For detailed comments on how Dante conceives the unconceivable, see the commentaries and notes on the four concluding cantos.)

However, there are, even here, surprises which, in retrospect, reverberate throughout the *cantica* and call into question the very plan of Paradise previously described. For suddenly Dante brings us to realize that everything we have seen so far has not been as we thought it was, either in the universe or in his representation of it. In the last cantos of the *Paradiso*, the cosmic system, in all its order and variety, dissolves to reveal an order which is wholly different in quality and kind. It now becomes clear that all the sights Dante has seen so far are only a prefiguration – or, in Dante’s lovely phrase, ‘shadowed prefaces’ (*Paradiso* 30: 78) – to the truth. In fact, what we have seen so far is not, in the fullest sense, what we will get.

Some indication of this final revelation has been given as early as [canto 4](#), when Dante declares himself perplexed as to whether the souls that he encounters in Paradise have actually returned to dwell for ever in the specific planetary heaven where he now encounters them. Plato’s opinion was that souls would make such a return. But Dante rejects this suggestion. Christian logic, and the logic of eternity, requires that each soul should enjoy directly, and without remove, the eternal presence of God. So all that Dante sees, until the Empyrean, is merely a show which has allowed him to conceive, in outline, the realities of a heavenly state through the limited apparatus of a human mind. For the human mind can only work through space and time, and can only perceive order in terms of more or less, of upper and lower,

hierarchy and gradation. It is entirely appropriate that it should exercise itself in this way. But it needs to recognize that all the order that it constructs – including the order of words on the page of a poem such as the *Commedia* – offers no more than an *analogy* of the truth that is encountered in the Empyrean.

But then in the Empyrean comes the greatest surprise of all, as disconcerting to most of our preconceptions as is the appearance of Dante's bodily form in the spiritual dimensions of the other world. It would be easy to imagine that, in ascending to a realm of intellectual light and pure love, Dante would concern himself finally with displays of pattern as abstract as he could make them. Yet it is now, and only now, that he sees the faces of the blessed, a throng of named individuals from history who have formed the community that he himself seeks to be part of:

I drew my eyes through every step and grade
now up, now lower, circling all around.
I saw there faces swayed to *caritas*,
arrayed in their own smiles and light not theirs...

Paradiso 31: 47–50

From the point in [canto 3](#) where he saw the fleeting and vestigial faces of the inconstant, Dante has seen the human being in terms only of light, fire and pyrotechnic motion. But it is not consistent with the Christian theology of the Incarnation or the Resurrection that this should be the final condition of the human being. Now, in the Empyrean, Dante prepares himself to countenance the final mystery, which is that God, against all reason, should be seen with the wholly recognizable features of a human person. The Dantean search ends with what has been known all along – or would have been known if human beings, in the throes of sin, had not prevented a just recognition of their own humanity.

In arriving at that conclusion, Dante's thinking, for all his devotion to philosophy and science, reveals that its foundation lies in Christian theology and the practice of faith. So, what were the principles of Dante's Christian thinking?

Dante, Theology and God

There are certain aspects of Christian understanding to which Dante makes surprisingly little reference in the *Paradiso*. The God of Genesis – creator

and lawgiver – makes no direct appearance, nor does the Jesus of the Gospels. No explicitly doctrinal account is offered of the workings of grace. Nothing overt is said about the Eucharist.

For some, such omissions are evidence of a prevailingly intellectual or analytical strand in Dante's temperament which leads him to emphasize the systems and schemes of religious thinking rather than the emotional impact of Christian experience or devotion. There are those who argue that, in Dante's view, it was possible for human beings to *think* their way to salvation without recourse to the mysteries of providential intervention. This is not an implausible position. When Dante deals with the central issues of religion, as, for instance, in the discussion of creation that occupies most of *Paradiso* 29, he does not produce a Sistine Chapel vision of God (though his visual powers are up to it), but a highly wrought piece of argumentation, with controversial emphases on specific aspects of angelology as taught in the universities of his day.

Others resist such an interpretation. For them, Dante's apparent omissions are evidence of a mind so penetrated with the experience and practices of faith that it can take for granted much that would now need to be defended in formal argument. Some of these readers point to the constant presence of scriptural reference in the subtext of Dante's poem and note that, while Dante was undoubtedly interested in rigorously systematic argument, he also insisted at salient points that the Scriptures must remain the authoritative guide in our pursuit of truth. (See *Paradiso* 5: 76–8, 19: 82–4 and 24: 88–93.) The subtext may also yield evidence of how deeply Dante's imagination was seized by fundamental realities of the Christian life. For instance, a eucharistic dimension is revealed in his repeated use of metaphors for feeding and feasting, as for example at the opening of [canto 24](#). Grace, likewise, may not be treated theoretically but is still, arguably, at issue whenever the poet uses the word '*grazic*' to refer to the effects of love that are reflected in Beatrice's behaviour. When – again in [canto 24](#), at lines 118–19 – Dante speaks of how grace 'woos' the mind, he draws on the language of secular love poetry to express the intimacy and stimulus of divine inspiration. (To convey how daring this reference is, a modern idiomatic translation might be 'flirts with' or even 'snogs' the mind.)

A third possibility, however, would be to combine these first two and suggest that we should not expect of the *Paradiso* merely a record of theological debate in the late Middle Ages, but a re-interpretation or

rediscovery of Christian belief, bearing the stamp of Dante's own intellectual interests and, equally, displaying an emotional and imaginative response to the specific issues that have engaged his attention throughout the *Commedia*. It is thus significant that when, in [canto 7](#), Dante offers an account of the Atonement as the central doctrine of Christian faith, he should do so with a particular and even eccentric insistence on the theme of justice which has concerned him in his political philosophy from his earliest writings. (See introduction to *Inferno*, pp. xxxiii–xxxviii.) Though there is much in that canto which reflects the thinking of theologians such as Saint Anselm of Canterbury (c. 1060–1109), Dante's argument comes perilously close to suggesting that the death of Christ was a justification for the existence of the Roman Empire, since it was under the dispensation of Roman justice that He chose to be crucified. At the same time, it is important to ask here, as elsewhere, why the discussion of the Atonement is entrusted to the person of Beatrice. Dante could by now have chosen to speak in his own person, to display his own command of Christian doctrine and, of course, it is he who writes Beatrice's words for her. But here and throughout the *Paradiso* narrative and dramatic considerations continue to have their significance: who speaks, how they speak, what words they use and what place they have in the developing narrative all have to be considered in determining Dante's theological position.

The *Paradiso*, then, should not be viewed (as it sometimes is) as a series of dutiful sermons or devout rehearsals of received ideas. Rather, it is an intellectually impassioned search for coherence and, in that sense, it is perhaps the most deeply personal of all three *cantiche* of the *Commedia*. Yet it is an essential part of faith to recognize that coherence is not the product of any single mind, or even of humanity at large, but a gift of God which displays itself in many voices other than one's own. The *Paradiso* is therefore also a profoundly joyous recognition of a multitude of voices that conjoin and collaborate (as Dante represents them) with the poet's own in exploring and declaring, as they unfold, the life as well as the doctrine of Christian belief.

Take, by way of illustration, the episode late in [canto 24](#) in which Saint Peter conducts an examination in which Dante is required to declare the principles on which his own faith depends, to which Dante replies:

I answer: I believe in one true God,
sole and eternal who, Himself not moved,
moves all the spheres by love and with desire.

For this belief I have – beside those proofs
that physics gives, and metaphysics, too –
the truth that comes to me, as rain from here,
through Moses, through the prophets and the psalms,
through Gospel writings and the words you wrote
when once the ardent Spirit raised you high.
And I believe in three eternal persons,
believing these one substance, one and three,
to whom, grammatically, apply both ‘is’ and ‘are’.
This deep condition of divinity,
which I here note, is many times impressed
by Gospel teachings on my intellect.

Paradiso 24: 130–44

One might suppose Dante’s response to the authoritative figure of the apostle to be some docile submission to orthodox phraseology. Not at all. The passage starts with a flamboyant and self-assertive ‘*Io*’ – the first person pronoun ‘I’, which in the Latin Creed and in Italian could simply have been registered by the verb ending, ‘*cred-o*’ The God in whom Dante professes to believe is defined, not in the anthropomorphic terms of fatherhood or jealousy or even love, but rather in terms of the Aristotelian science to which Dante is so devoted. God is the sole unmoved mover of all things, the answer to the question of why things exist at all. Proofs from physics and from metaphysics are allowed to have had their influence on Dante’s belief. And when he approaches the mystery of the Trinity, Dante resorts to an analogy drawn from the technical sphere of grammar and language which to him, as a poet, would be most familiar.

Dante imagines his encounter with Saint Peter as a university examination, conducted according to the rules of adversarial debate which prevailed in such institutions as the Sorbonne. To that extent, the God in whom he believes is a principle of intellectual coherence to be appreciated systematically by the well-educated intellect. Yet this is not all. Behind this intellectual construct lie the proofs that have come to Dante through history and the continuing narrative of revelation (invoked here at lines 136–8) which began with Moses, were further developed in the Gospels and now through the Holy Spirit are at work in the Church of which Saint Peter himself was the founder. If Dante speaks in highly intellectual terms, he also makes such terms relative to the ever developing story of the Christian mystery. In that sense, too, Dante recognizes that his words, individualistic or idiosyncratic as they might sometimes appear, are also words that both proceed from and contribute to a communal understanding of faith. This is confirmed by the context in which Dante’s creed is set. In its opening lines,

[canto 24](#) has already made oblique but unmistakable reference to the celebration of the Eucharist – which is the crucial event in the communal life of the Church – when Beatrice addresses the company of saints as ‘You chosen confrères of the Blessèd Lamb/ who feeds you at His solemn feast’. In short, the theological truths that Dante utters are not self-sufficient proofs of God, but part of a living understanding that is expressed as much in the life and liturgy of the Church as in its controversial debates. More important still is the reason why Dante should be required to speak at all in Paradise. This may seem like a university examination. It differs, however, from any secular equivalent in that nothing at all is at stake. Dante cannot fail this examination. On the contrary, as Beatrice makes clear at the outset (see *Paradiso* 24: 40–45), Dante speaks simply for the pleasure of it, to glorify and celebrate the faith. Here, as in much of the *Paradiso*, the intellect is best seen as being engaged in a game played out for the delight of those who are already practised in its moves.

A creed, in the understanding of the early Church, did not represent merely a set of propositions or arguments to which the faithful were required to give their considered assent. Rather, to say ‘*credo*’ (‘I believe’) was comparable to making a solemn promise or a marriage vow. The words that the speakers repeated in public were an effective act (or what modern philosophers would call a ‘performative utterance’), a commitment by which speakers undertook to pursue in good faith that particular mode of understanding by which the community of the Church sustained itself in existence. (See Nicholas Lash, *Believing Three Ways in One God: A Reading of the Apostles’ Creed* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1993).) A creed is not a manifesto, still less a controversial battlecry. It is the outline of a form of life which, in the very process of being lived, reveals its implications through witness rather than argumentation.

Something of the same may be said of theology as originally practised. Theology may well concern itself with strict and lucid argument. Yet its success will be measured less in the pursuit of definitive proofs than in service and celebration of the faith, and by an ever clearer articulation of its possible meanings. (See Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Blackwell, 1999).) The practising of a faith – whether intellectually or otherwise – cannot be seen as the pursuit of an abstract formula. It always requires a response to the context of a particular community and will always accommodate itself to the language, developing through time, in which that

community traditionally speaks, and to the narrative context in which specific acts of faith unfold. Dante's own *credo* in *Paradiso* 24 exemplifies the point, as does his response to the central principles of Christian belief – the Creation, the Trinity, the Incarnation, Atonement and Resurrection – which are examined in [canto 7](#).

Before turning to these specific aspects of Dante's theology, the reader should recognize certain difficulties concerning, especially, the relationship between faith and reason, which are likely to arise in any present-day secular consideration of Dante's position, and which run parallel with difficulties in the thinking of his own age that the *Commedia* engages with very directly. Following Renè Descartes, our tendency today is to declare 'I think, therefore I am', and establish our beliefs (even though Descartes himself might not have done so) on the basis of evidence and mathematical calculation. In an earlier Christian perspective, a better formula would have been 'I *believe* therefore I am', seeking through intellectual enquiry to articulate the implications of the existence that faith assures us we possess. It is this formula to which the creed points with its '*Io*'.

It would not, on the face of it, be wholly anachronistic to suppose that Dante and other thinkers of his age – in particular Aquinas – had begun to anticipate the later position. Certainly, when the Church required a rationalist to combat the developments in scientific thinking that arose with the later Renaissance and the Enlightenment, who could provide a rationally objective answer to the agnostic and the atheist, it turned to Aquinas. Dante himself is often (too often, perhaps) considered an obedient disciple of Aquinas, and has frequently been enlisted as a champion in the same cause. Yet, in the light of recent studies of both Aquinas and Dante, it is clear that a distinction needs to be drawn between their conception of rationality and that which has subsequently come to seem natural. For Aquinas, reason needed to be exercised under strict conditions and with considerable qualification – and the truly rational response was to acknowledge this. Whereas when Dante follows Aquinas, as he does especially in the *Paradiso* – it is as part of a dramatic process of self-adjustment in which his profound devotion to rational analysis is brought back into the service of faith.

The point in theological and intellectual history at which Aquinas and Dante both found themselves represented the intersection of two age-old traditions, the one deriving from the Judaic, Christian and Islamic traditions, the other from the philosophical achievements of Greece and Rome.

Philosophers of the period began to realize, in the Judaic and Islamic world as well as in Christendom, that Aristotle could be regarded (in Dante's phrase) as 'the master of those who think and know' (*Inferno* 4: 132), and to recognize the acumen of many other pre-Christian thinkers. The more they did so, however, the more a difference of emphasis began to reveal itself between traditional theological thinking and the intellectual patrimony of the classical world. For where the Graeco-Roman world had tended to interest itself in the nature of knowledge and human understanding, religious thinkers of the Abrahamic tradition were primarily concerned with examining the nature of existence itself, mediating on the creative power of the one God and the possible relationship of the creature to such a Creator. The theologians who wrote the book of Genesis were, above all, fascinated by the question of why there is something rather than nothing, and by the astonishing implications of the suggestion that the universe was, actually and literally, created out of nothing. The Greeks took a simpler view. They assumed that the universe was eternal, and therefore – freed from the perplexing consideration of origins – bent their thoughts to examining how the world worked in the way that it did. The religious mind – strongly re-asserted in Islam – could perfectly well recognize that the world around us was a legitimate object of scientific inquiry. (In this respect, as early as the ninth century Islamic science was far in advance of its Western counterpart.) But religious thinking refused to allow that the Creator could in any way be confused with or discovered in the created order. God is not to be found in the rocks and winds and physical forces that the pagans idolatrously worshipped. Ultimately we are concerned not to understand but to realize in the totality of our being what, actually, it means 'to be', and to participate fully, as creatures of the One God, in the order of creation.

Rationality, then, can reveal ever more clearly the skeleton of the world. It is faith, however, that will teach us how to respond to and enjoy the living body of existence. There then comes a point where our rational curiosity may, by its own type of action, hold us back from such a response. There are, potentially, tensions here, which Dante himself realizes with particular force. Running through the *Commedia* is a profound but perplexed devotion to the achievements of classical culture in the realms of philosophy, science and, of course, the literary arts which Dante was himself seeking to cultivate. This is most evident in Dante's concern over the fate of Virgil or, more generally, the noble pagans of Limbo. (See *Purgatorio* 3: 23–44; *Purgatorio* 7: 28–36

and throughout *Purgatorio* 21 and 22.) This concern continues into the *Paradiso* and arguably is not resolved even there. (See commentary and notes below to *Paradiso* 19 and 20.) Yet the *Paradiso* very largely reflects the balanced views of Thomas Aquinas, who maintains that the claims of existence, as pursued in faith, should never be obscured by the claims of reason.

At the core of Aquinas's rational theology is the realization that, while human beings may use their God-given reason to the full, any such use must be governed by the fact that no systematic account of God can lead us to an understanding of what God, within the divine nature, actually is. Aristotelian logic can tell us that there is a God. What no logic can do (as Herbert McCabe has pointed out in *God Still Matters* (Continuum, 2002), p. 36) is tell us, ultimately, what an infinite God is *like*. We may thus rightly investigate the variety and complexity of the created world. But at every point we shall know (as *certain* knowledge) that God, as the Creator of this world, is not only greater than it but different from it.

When we know that something is, it remains to inquire in what way it is, so that we may know *what* it is. But since concerning God we cannot know what he is but only what he is not, we cannot consider in what way God is but only in what way he is not.

Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Question Three,

quoted in McCabe, p. 37

Such an understanding has two consequences, neither of them inimical to reason and both of them deeply consistent with the theological mentality that Dante develops in the *Paradiso*.

The first concerns the place that analogy holds in the thinking of both Aquinas and Dante. The ultimate unknowability of God's nature need not be seen as a restriction or limitation. After all, even in the sphere of human lives, knowledge is by no means the be-all and end-all. Love, for instance, is critically important and may tell us as much about life as science may tell us about the general laws of nature. But knowledge can still grasp the analogies and metaphors in and through which we imagine our relationship with the Creator. Given (in faith) that we are wholly dependent on our Maker, these analogies may still give shape and colour to our existences. Thus, in the final canto of the *Paradiso*, Dante, in a manner entirely consistent with Aquinas's thinking, envisages, at the penultimate moment of his narrative, the Book of the Universe, which binds together all that is knowable by number and analysis in the phenomena of the created order (*Paradiso* 33: 84–6). Yet if

knowledge is not everything, then neither are books. And at the climax of the canto Dante passes beyond both the book and the universe. The vision he finally receives is a vision of the face of God. This vision defeats understanding of any systematic or general kind precisely because it is a particularity, a singularity, a face which may be loved but cannot be described. There is no attempt here to project some human conception of the divine on to God's unknowable reality. There is, however, the confidence, born of Christian belief, that God, incarnate in Christ, indeed has a human face. This is the ultimate truth and the ultimate mystery. But it is a mystery that justifies the pursuit of all those activities – including reading and the acquisition of knowledge – which rightly occupy our minds until the revelation occurs.

But this, in the second place, is to suggest that rationality, though concerned with proof is also a way of participating in a process or continuing conversation. Rationality, in this understanding, is a narrative faculty, as Dante's own narrative – always concerned with the interplay of Dante and Virgil or Dante and Beatrice – amply illustrates. We are most rational when we contribute most directly to the development of a collaborative understanding. Conclusions and certitudes matter less than a loyal perseverance in our discourse with others. This is particularly evident in Dante's representation of the Christian philosophers – including pre-eminently Aquinas – in [cantos 10–14](#). Aquinas's own conception of theology is consistent with this. As David Burrell puts it in *Knowing the Unknowable God* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), Aquinas's fundamental proposal is rather like 'a call to personal conversion', in which we realize the absolute transcendence of God and consequently abandon all pretensions to rational possession in favour of an active realization of our status as created beings. Far from standing back from the world in some posture of scientific neutrality, we participate in its truth (as Dante ultimately participates in the movements of the love that turns 'the sun and other stars'). Truth itself ceases to be a matter of rational proof and becomes analogous to those acts (such as the saying of the Creed) in which we promise ourselves faithfully to be true to another being.

It cannot be said that attitudes such as Aquinas defines are easy to understand or to maintain, especially perhaps for those scholars and academics who are commonly inclined to assert the self-sufficiency of rational inquiry. Aquinas's thinking points (as does Dante's creed in

Paradiso 24) to a ‘form of life’ which properly requires to be practised and explored communally in daily acts such as a church would encourage. Aquinas himself, who wrote not only philosophy but also prayers and liturgies, plainly understood that. But neither the modern world, nor perhaps Dante himself – initially at least – displays a comparable understanding. Rationalism and individualism are closely akin, assuring us that we each know best how to organise the time and life that we have at our disposal, and to set our own objectives. Dante – though not a priest or a professional theologian – anticipated the appeal of that solipsistic vision. An exile and a poet, inventing and crafting a world out of his own imaginings, he had in some sense little alternative but to adopt an understanding of that sort. Yet at crucial moments in his career he displays, dramatically, a willingness to combat in his own thinking the tendency to claim that rational knowledge might be the ultimate goal of human existence. His account of Ulysses in *Inferno* 26 is the principal example of this. The pagan Ulysses, who sets out in search of intellectual adventure, clearly holds up a mirror to some of Dante’s own ambitions. But the poet also recognizes how the Ulyssean mentality threatens all those bonds of relationship – between parents and children, wife and friends – that reflect our participation in the narrative of human existence, or, in other words, make life worth living. Ulysses’ last voyage in search of knowledge and experience is a voyage into ‘worlds where no man dwells’ (*Inferno* 26: 117) and destroys those who depend upon him no less effectively than his strategies as a war counsellor had once destroyed Troy.

By the time of the *Paradiso*, however, Ulysses has been wholly replaced in Dante’s mind by Beatrice. In other words, Dante’s concern to *know* has been replaced by a rediscovered desire to *love*, to surrender himself fully to a relationship and, above all, to enjoy all possible manifestations of life that now appear before him. In his meeting with Beatrice at the climax of the *Purgatorio*, it is this that Beatrice requires of the Dante character, explicitly demanding that he abandon even his attachment to the intellectual example of Virgil. Now, in writing the *Paradiso*, Dante fashions a poetic structure which, for all its intellectual rigour, is itself a surrogate ‘form of life’ in which the poet can view with joyous detachment the massively rational system he himself has established. At the very point where, on entering the Empyrean in [canto 27](#), the poet imagines how we can go beyond those categories of time and space that are the foundation of all rational constructions, Dante looks

down with comic indulgence to observe the track across the oceans of the terrestrial globe that Ulysses had traced in his ‘crazy flight’. Dante’s own journey, now breaking all bounds, has succeeded precisely by *not* breaking bounds. His advance, under the guidance of Virgil and Beatrice, has at every point been subject to a recognition of how limited the knowledge available to any individual must always be.

The consequences of Dante’s new position have a considerable bearing on the way that we, in collaboration with its author, should read the *Paradiso*. His procedure is at every stage consistent with, and possibly dependent upon, procedures established by the traditions of faith articulated very clearly by Saint Thomas Aquinas. The crucial moment in Aquinas’s thought (the ‘call to conversion’ that Burrell speaks of) may be observed in [canto 1](#), lines 34–6, where Dante, with surprising humility, speaks of his poem as a little flame that might ignite a great bonfire, and goes on to imagine that ‘better voices’ may follow the single voice that is presently speaking:

A minute spark precedes a towering flame.
Others may be who, after me, will pray
with better voice towards Apollo’s hill.

The conflagration envisaged here is very different from the consuming fire into which Ulysses has been transformed, and the tiny spark similarly different from the mock modesty of Ulysses’s ‘little speech’ (*Inferno* 26: 121). As in his credo, so in the first pages of the *cantica* Dante imagines a communal, constantly evolving flame of life which testifies to the unknown life beyond.

But nowhere is Dante closer to Aquinas in his understanding of the interplay between analogical knowledge and existence than in *Paradiso* 4: 40–63, where the question arises as to what Dante (and the reader) is in fact being offered in the vision of Heaven. In each of the planetary heavens he encounters groups of spirits each of which display their own particular virtues and characteristics. Does this mean that these groups will remain eternally in the planetary sphere where Dante observes them and – as poet – has placed them? Plato believed that souls would rejoin the spheres that had exerted the dominant influence over their temporal lives. Courteously, the Christian Dante begs to differ. Since all souls are created directly by God, the final destiny of each human soul is to return directly to the presence of God – which, in Dante’s cosmology, means that they will all be found in an eternity beyond all spatial and temporal hierarchies, in the Empyrean. But what is it

that we are now seeing as Dante traverses the planetary system? It is an analogy, and all religious minds will know what that means. The Old Testament, for example, speaks of the hands and feet of God. But it would be idolatrous – and thus contrary to the very spirit of the Judaeo-Christian tradition – to suppose that such phrases were anything more than metaphor. Our minds may be nourished by such metaphor, but the point of this nourishment is to prepare us for that gymnastic leap of faith which carries us into the ‘no-thing-ness’ of divine existence. In the same way, the universe itself, so lovingly explored in Dante’s text, is nothing more or less than a metaphor (as is Dante’s text itself), preparing us to recognize that, keen and serious as we must be in our pursuit of knowledge, existence in all its immediacy is wholly different from anything our minds might expect:

To speak in this way fits the human mind.
For you can only grasp through things you’ve sensed
what mind will then present as fit for thought.
For this same reason, Scripture condescends
to your capacities, and says that God
has hands and feet – though meaning otherwise.

Paradiso 4: 40–45

With this in mind – acknowledging that for Dante, as for Aquinas, theology is not simply a body of information but a method and a practice – we may return to the passage in *Paradiso* 29 where Dante speaks most directly of God as Creator, and then consider how he treats the specifically Christian conception of God as the Trinity.

In *Paradiso* 29: 10–18, Dante, now in the *Primum Mobile*, has just seen the intense point of light that stands as a preliminary metaphor for God. Around this point, he now sees a great circulation of spheres. But these are not any longer the spheres of the planetary orbits. They are, rather, the nine circles of the angelic orders – that order of existence which enjoys immediate experience of divine reality, sustained by contemplation and expressed in the concentrated intelligence of their worship. Against this background, Beatrice explains the nature and motives that inspired God in the creation of the universe:

Then she began: ‘I’ll say – though ask, I won’t –
what you now want to hear. I’ve seen it there
where every “when” and “where” attains its point.
Not seeking any good that He had not –
there can be none – but so his shining-out
could in return shine back and say: “I am”,

in His eternity beyond all time,
beyond our understanding, as He pleased,
to new loves Love Eternal opened out.

Paradiso 29: 10–18

Here, Dante offers a concise, accurate yet distinctive account of the God who, from Abraham to Aquinas, had been known as the God of pure existence. The name for God – as revealed to Moses and subsequently investigated by Aquinas – is ‘Who is’. This is a riddling phrase, and appropriately so. For along with an emphasis upon a pure act of being, the two words recorded here (in English, of course) are enough to suggest that the fullness of existence, out of which the world was created, is allowed only to God and must remain a mystery – or even, from a worldly, literal point of view, a ‘non-sense’. Whatever ‘is’ means in relation to God, it cannot mean the same when it is applied to something that has been created out of nothing as it means when applied to the Creator. Existence as such can only be perceived by secondary creatures as an imperative or interrogative rather than an indicative. We are commanded to be, and question why we are, but cannot resolve the question by indicating any observable chain of cause and effect or any original source of energy. That would be to elude entirely the question of why there is something rather than nothing, and to fall directly into idolatry. Yet, in recognizing this, mystery ceases to be the restrictive inhibition to inquiry that it has become since the Enlightenment and is revealed as the generative source of all active existence.

Dante, despite his scientific propensities, does not interest himself in his account of Creation with anything like a medieval version of the ‘big bang’ theory. He remains immune to any unwarranted claims that reason might make, and preserves this immunity by locating his discussion in the context of the vision of angels. To think of angels ensures a continual awareness of those alternative forms of intelligence in which loving contemplation is everything and rational argument nothing at all. Arriving, in [canto 27](#), at the limit of the physical universe, at the *Primum Mobile*, Dante discovers that what lies beyond the physical heavens is not unknowable chaos or overwhelming confusion, but a reality no less orderly than the planetary system. This is constituted by the hierarchy of the angels. Angels, for Dante, are beings of pure intelligence, whose movements are initiated wholly not by limbs (or even wings) but by the actions of understanding and love. Beyond all manifestations of physical energy – expressed in the nine astronomical heavens – are nine orders of angels, each communicating purpose and desire

to the astronomical spheres. In short, the angels are evidence for Dante that there is intelligent life in the universe, a realm wholly devoted to the contemplation of value rather than fact, of beauty rather than efficiency.

It is only in this mode that the human mind can begin to contemplate the truth of the divine purposes from which creation itself was projected. Dante stresses that God did not create out of any mechanical or even psychological need. Creation out of nothing implies a wholly free act of choice, performed out of the love of existence itself. Yet if Dante preserves the mystery surrounding such an act, he also represents it (here, as through the *Paradiso*) as an act of inconceivable generosity, or, in his Italian, of '*larghezza*,' meaning 'largesse' or 'largeness of design'. Thus God gains nothing – not even praise – by this act. Its one result is that all creatures should rejoice in their own existences, saying: 'I exist.' Significantly, the first group of sinners that Dante depicts in the *Inferno* are the apathetic, the 'wretched souls' who 'were never truly alive'. Their choice has been to refuse to say 'I exist', and all the damned who people Hell have found new ways in which to insist upon a similarly obstinate refusal. Conversely, in the *Paradiso*, the persons whom Dante celebrates have all, according to their various virtues, realized in their lives the ultimate generosity of creation.

As Beatrice's exposition proceeds in [canto 29](#), so it confirms and extends this understanding by reference to the Trinity. Though it is absurd to speak of 'before' and 'after' in relation to infinite being, none the less Dante emphasizes that the prior reality was a reality of pure and absolute act. And to speak of an act which is also a perfect act of love requires that one contemplates the three-in-oneness of the Trinity. The psychology of human love – though a wholly inadequate guide – provides an initial model for the contemplation of this mystery. Love, when it is not merely self-regard, is always love towards an object that lies beyond the possession of the lover. So the Father loves the Son. But 'towardness' itself is a reality here. And that 'towardness' corresponds to the Holy Spirit. It contains within it an understanding (and acceptance) of distance and distinctiveness that ensures the dissolution of any self-regarding identity, while simultaneously attributing value to the identity of another.

Throughout its troubled history, the Christian doctrine of the Trinity has often been regarded as the theological equivalent of some number puzzle, requiring a peculiarly sophisticated consideration of concepts of unity and diversity, identity and difference. Or, considering the suggestions stimulated

by the word ‘person’ – which could mean ‘mask’ or ‘aspect’ or ‘mode’ as well as ‘individual’ – the doctrine could be taken to emphasize that God is to be understood as a condition of pure relationship, not a power or an authority or even an origin, but an act of love in which identity is eternally dissolved and sustained in regenerative reciprocity. (The philosopher Søren Kierkegaard speaks of relationship as the realm of pure spirit.)

As devotional exercises, both approaches have their strengths in that they engage, in pursuit of religious ends, the same sort of mentality that now leads mathematicians to work in many dimensions other than the obvious three, or physicists to trace matter in the movement of subatomic particles. Yet in each case these devotions would need to be governed by Aquinas’s principle of analogy. The notion of the Trinity may, for Christian thinkers, be a way of safeguarding the notions of divine activity and divine love. And so, to speak of Father, Son and Holy Spirit is to confess, by the very inadequacy – or even nonsensicalness – of the formulation, an ultimate dependency on the nothingness of the divine.

It is significant that Dante, despite his appetite for controversy and moon spot conundrums, does not attempt any rationally defensible treatment of the Trinity. On the contrary, in the creed of *Paradiso* 24 he traces his commitment to the doctrine to the words and experience of the Gospels, these being (as he hopes, in [canto 1](#), his own poem will be) the sparks that ignite yet greater flames in those that follow. More importantly, perhaps, especially for secular readers of the *Paradiso*, the absence of any doctrinal obsession on Dante’s part is complemented by a supremely imaginative devotion to the Trinity which displays itself throughout in the structure, imagery and rhythms of the third *cantica*, and also in some of its most poetically exalted passages. This is as it should be. The Trinity, as the Christian name for the Creator, demands to be lived in thought, word and deed, not talked about.

So, at *Paradiso* 13: 25–7, for instance, Dante writes an ecstatic hymn to the Three-in-One:

Those songs there praised not Bacchus nor Peana.
They sang three persons all divine in kind,
and in one person human and divine.

Notably, the singers of this hymn, including Aquinas, are the Christian philosophers who, in Dante’s view, have used their God-given reason to fullest effect. But the words of their song here acknowledge a principle which transcends and yet both inebriates and clarifies their existences. Dante’s own

words respond in kind. He evokes both the orgiastic fervor of Bacchus and the lucid music of Apollo (here referred to as ‘Peana’). Both forms of pagan song may be analogous to the hymn of the philosophers. Yet the contradictory yoking of these two modes of pagan celebration – the one a song of self-abandonment, the other a song of illuminated self-possession – already suggests that both must yield to some other and wholly different song, where contraries are ultimately reconciled. Dante’s ‘not’ and ‘nor’ effect the negation which is essential if one is to insist upon the mode of analogy. But negation does not repress the hymn that the Trinity inspires. The *terzina* form which Dante uses throughout the *Commedia* is itself sometimes said to represent a homage to the Trinity. But if it does, this is not because of any merely numerical coincidence. On the contrary, in the *terzina* quoted above number dissolves into rhythm, into a liquid progression and inversion of the words ‘three’ and ‘one’ and ‘all’, enacting in miniature the process of revelation which sees the human and the divine all involved in the same vigorous activity of existence.

Or consider the triadic patterning that Dante adopts in his vision of the angelic hierarchy in [canto 28](#). As created beings, the angels take their unity and relationship from the sustaining presence of the Three-in-One to which their contemplative minds are eternally directed. The nine orders comprise three suborders, each of three particular ranks. Working to one-end, the angels work in threes and each triad operates in concert with the other two. But Dante’s verse itself responds to this with a rhapsodic fantasia on the word ‘three’, and a rhythm – as heady yet rich as that of the philosophers’ earlier hymn – which negates the material object of attention and, in doing so, celebrates the true if miraculous ground on which the existence of the created cosmos is founded. Thus (to quote only six lines of this extended passage):

The second triad where the sap thus flows
within this sempiternal springtime season –
which night-ascendant Aries never spoils –
sings out perpetually that winter’s done,
‘Osanna!’ in three tunes that sound in three
orders of happiness, each en-threeing here.

Paradiso 28: 115–20

Dante’s treatment of Creation, and of the Trinity, take the mind to the limits of its human capacities. But not beyond that limit. Interested as Dante is in angels, he never suggests that human beings can or should want themselves to become angelic in their powers. On the contrary, he is acutely

aware of history, with all its travails, as the sphere in which human beings are properly to witness and perform the truth. That is in large part the significance of the doctrines of the Incarnation and of the Resurrection. More will be said of these doctrines in the commentaries to [cantos 15–17](#), where, at the centre of an otherwise otherworldly vision, Dante's poem surprisingly revisits Florence and focuses upon the figure of the poet's Florentine ancestor, Cacciaguida, who died under the sign of the Cross in the course of the Second Crusade in the mid twelfth century.

It was in Florence that Dante witnessed the life and death of Beatrice. And, as if confident now of her immortal existence, it is through his portrayal of Beatrice in *Paradiso* that he demonstrates most fully what it means for the human person to live according to the truth of the Incarnation and Resurrection, and to offer – as in a mirror – some manifestation of what the Trinity created the human person to be.

Beatrice and the Human Person

For many readers of the *Comtmedia*, Beatrice has proved to be a problem, especially as she is represented in the *Paradiso*. To some, Dante has seemed idolatrous in allowing her so central a position. Others compare her unfavourably with the Francesca of *Inferno* 5 or the figure of Virgil, who has hitherto been Dante's guide on his fictional journey, and lament the absence of that realistic depth of characterization which Dante has hitherto displayed in his depiction of the human person.

One remedy for such dissatisfactions would be to turn to Sandro Botticelli's subtle illustrations of the *Paradiso*, produced for an early printed edition over a century and a half after Dante wrote it and now available in a Royal Academy catalogue edited by Hein-Th. Schulze Altcapenberg (Royal Academy, 2000). It is evident that the figure of Beatrice demanded all of Botticelli's artistic attention and elicited from him an extremely varied visual response. In his treatment of the final cantos of the *Purgatorio* he produced a luxuriously choreographic account of Dante's scene, with crowds of angels and allegorical personages thronging around the central figure of the Florentine Madonna. The *Paradiso* offers ample opportunity for similarly visual effects – of dance, pyrotechnic brilliance of movement and great sweeps of angelic processions. Yet page after page of Botticelli's *Paradiso* concentrates on Beatrice and Dante alone, and draws from the intimate detail

of Dante's text a constantly changing spectrum of gestures and expressions and sharply focused glances in which laughter is as likely to be a feature as any stern didactic purpose. Beatrice, far from displacing God as an object of reverential awe, is offered as a dynamic representation of human energy and intelligence. In comparison with Beatrice, Francesca can seem like the faded photograph of a once vivacious aunt and Virgil a hollow-eyed statue covered with gentle moss. There is nothing unrealistic about Botticelli's representation. Yet the reality he chooses to identify in Beatrice is not that reality of identifying marks of mind and body which has become the familiar stock-in-trade of second-rate novels and soap operas. It is, rather, that greater reality which we perceive when we respond to the expressions, the movements, the gait, the speech patterns and aura of another person.

For those who read Dante's text without preconception, there is, at every point, evidence to support Botticelli's interpretation of Beatrice – in the uncompromising but exhilarating rigour of the arguments that Dante attributes to her, in the delicate but surging rhythms that describe her smiles or, on occasions, her anger. It is, however, to Dante himself, and particularly to his theology, that one must turn to appreciate her full significance.

Beatrice is, for Dante, the human person as it was always meant to be, and could become again if it were freed from the distortions of misdirected desires. It has not been easy for Dante to arrive at this realization. In the final cantos of the *Purgatorio*, his encounter with Beatrice in the Earthly Paradise was profoundly unexpected and shocking. And the surprise – which was all the greater because Virgil at this point disappeared – resided above all in the realization that human reason and human expectations provide in the end only a very inadequate measure of the scope of human possibilities. These possibilities lie constantly to be developed and rediscovered in direct engagement with the creative infinity of God. Always surrounding Beatrice are the implications of the title of the *Vita nuova* – the realization that, because human beings do not call their own lives into existence, so the fulfilment of those lives will be a continual experience of new life, offered to them from beyond. At *Paradiso* 28: 116 Dante speaks of Heaven itself as a '*prim av er a sempiterna*', a perpetual spring time, always in the process of producing new manifestations of what it means to exist.

All of this would be clouded if one were to suppose that Beatrice is an allegorical representation of the perfect Church. This interpretation has the virtue of explaining why, in [cantos 7–29](#) of the *Paradiso*, she expounds the

most important aspects of Christian doctrine, and also why she speaks with particular anger about the corruption of the Church in Dante's own time. According to Beatrice, the Church should be the repository of truth but, as an institution, it has become precisely the opposite. None the less, to attempt a conveniently allegorical reading of this sort – as if it represented by paraphrase an exact summation of Dante's authorial intentions – would simultaneously obscure the essential tenet of Christian belief, which is that truth is not an intellectual formula but a person, the Christ of the Gospels. A creed, as we have seen, is a profession of loyalty to that person. And Beatrice in the *Paradiso* demands that Dante should realize, continually and anew, that truth is indeed incarnate, and waits to be rediscovered in specific human beings. It is for this reason that Beatrice's laughter is more important than the doctrine she enunciates. One might easily suppose that her smiles were those of some complacent teacher congratulating herself on her pupil's success. The reverse is the case. The doctrine that Beatrice offers to Dante is intended – as the doctrine of the Church should be – to enhance and enrich our awareness of the human being and of the possibilities inherent in its relationship with the divine. Brows may often be furrowed over the knottiness of the questions that the *Paradiso* raises. However, the answers that are given should not be regarded as formulaic remedies for confusion but as occasions for the exhilaration and delight which is most fully experienced (as experience of many a good conversation will suggest) when mind meets mind and person meets person.

It has taken Dante a long time to realize this. In the *Vita nuova*, and even in the early description of Beatrice's advent in the Earthly Paradise (see *Purgatorio* 28 and 29), he has been inclined to construct tentative allegorical equations between Beatrice and various aspects of the divine order. There is a continual association in the *Vita nuova* between Beatrice and the number three (or its multiples, especially the number nine), suggesting that she is indeed the purest creation of the Trinity. The delightfully disingenuous motives that lead Dante to nominate Beatrice as, merely, the ninth most beautiful woman in Florence, have a solemn undertone which declares that she exists in fact in the most intimate relationship with the the God of the Trinity. (See *Vita nuova* 29.) Premonitions of Beatrice's death are accompanied by visions of angelic presences recalling those that spoke to the disciples at the empty tomb on the morning of Christ's resurrection. Nor does Dante hesitate to suggest a direct analogy between Beatrice and Christ. Other

women in Florence, beloved of his fellow poets, are to be considered, as Saint John the Baptist was, the forerunners of a greater Christ to come. (See *Vita nuova* 24.)

Yet Beatrice is not Christ. Nor would Dante propose that she is. She is, rather, what Christ makes it possible for human beings to be. It is, therefore, of the utmost importance that Beatrice does not lead Dante directly into the presence of God but leaves his side in the penultimate phase of the *cantica*, and allows him to approach the ultimate mystery of new life in his own person. This moment resembles the moment at which Virgil disappears from Dante's company in *Purgatorio* 30. Yet it is also radically different, for nowhere does Beatrice seem more real than in the final prayer to her that Dante utters as he sees her at a distance, simply as she is, one among the innumerable ranks of human beings who have reflected in their lives the truth that God calls them to witness:

From that high region where the thunder rolls,
no mortal eye could ever be so far –
though sunk beneath the ocean's utmost depth –
as my sight was from Beatrice now.
Yet that meant nothing. For her image came
not blurred or lessened by the space between.
'In you, beloved, my hope grows strong. All this
you bore: to greet me and to make me whole,
you left your footprint in the depth of Hell.
The inward strength and grace of everything
I since have seen has come to me, I know,
through you, your goodness and your grace and power.
From servitude you've led me to be free
by all those pathways and by all the means
you have within your power to exercise.
Keep safe in me your own magnificence,
so that my soul, since you have made it well,
should leave the knot of body, pleasing you.'

Paradiso 31: 73–90

The distance that Dante here insists upon – and celebrates with such emotional and imaginative power – emphasizes that the fundamental value of any created being resides in its refusal to presume identity with its creator. It is also the moment in which Dante offers a final re-interpretation of the courtly love tradition on which his earliest love poetry was founded. The idea of 'Love from a distance' – '*Amor de lonh*' – had led even some of Dante's Occitan precursors to realize that desire could be a refining power, bringing the lover to an ever greater understanding of his own dependence upon his relationship with the dignity and delicacy of the Other. Already in the later

cantos of the *Purgatorio* he had located the merit of his own poetry in its capacity to extend this formula to an investigation of the relationship between himself and the ultimate Otherness of the divinity. (See introduction to *Purgatorio*, pp. li–liix.) In the *Paradiso*, a similar redefinition of the courtly tradition continues. At many points Dante's vocabulary in describing the action of God draws on a courtly lexicon to indicate, beyond the range of technical philosophy and theology, the intimacy, brilliance and splendour with which God appears to the human being. God shows 'courtesy to his creatures' and above all the generosity – or '*larghezza*' – of a well-intentioned lord; he displays prowess or '*valore*' – as a knight might do; boldness – '*baldezza*' – may characterize the response of a creature to the demands of its chivalric lord. (See, for example, *Paradiso* 5: 19 and 32: 109.) Theologically, however, the most significant connection that Dante makes is to re-establish the relationship that existed from the first between the development of courtly love and the cult of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

It is not necessary to investigate in any detail the relationship between this cult and the development of vernacular love poetry in order to realize that Dante's devotion to Beatrice is in some measure related to his devotion to the figure of Mary. He speaks of this in *Paradiso* 23: 88–90, asserting that he invokes the name of the 'lovely flower' of Mary 'at dawn and evening', and the *Purgatorio* is punctuated by references to the Marian antiphons, '*Salve Regina*' and '*Alma Redemptoris*' and to the scriptural narrative of the Virgin's life. Then, in the last canto of the *Paradiso*, his approach to the vision of God is prefaced by an extended hymn to the Virgin, uttered by the last of his three guides in the eternal world, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux.

Saint Bernard (1090–1153) was the most important figure in the Church of the twelfth century, capable of creating popes and motivating (disastrous) crusades. But he was also a reformer of the monastic orders, concerned, above all in his *Sermons on the Song of Songs* (1136), to develop on the analogy of erotic love a profound understanding of the mystic communion that the human soul, when moved by charity, could enjoy with its maker. For Saint Bernard the very type of that love was the relationship that existed between the Virgin and her son. In this respect, his thinking reflects a movement in the eleventh and twelfth centuries which introduced a decisive change in theological sensibility. Dangerous as the Marian cult was undoubtedly to become in terms of gender politics, its origins were in a form of proto-humanism. Humanity in Mary had shown its capacity literally to

embody the Incarnate God. It was therefore legitimate to look for, and seek to create, God-bearing images in the sphere of nature and human art. Thus cathedrals such as Chartres were seen as analogies to the body of Mary, containing luminously within their womb the light of absolute truth. Emotions, too, of tenderness, concern and anguish such as Mary might have felt over her son increasingly came to be seen as significant expressions of Christian participation in that truth.

For Dante – reflecting all this in a variety of ways – the dominant emphasis falls upon a paradox that he also explores in his representation of Beatrice. The paradox is that the true dignity of a human being is to be located in an attitude of humility towards the Creator which is also an attitude of perfect self-possession. To be sure, the Mary of the Scriptures – a vulnerable Jewish unmarried mother who gave her conscious consent to the providential role that was offered her – is not evoked by Dante. His attention, instead, falls upon the dignity of decision, made by Mary alone, without which the providential dispensation would not have been fulfilled:

‘Virgin and Mother, daughter of your son,
greater than all in honour and humility,
you are the point that truth eternally
is fixed upon. And you have made the nature
of the human being proud. Its maker, then,
did not disdain to make himself his making.
Love, in your womb, was fanned to fire again.
And here, in this eternal peace, the warmth of love
has brought the Rose to germinate and bloom.
You are, for us, the noon-time torch of love.
You are, among those mortals there below,
the clearest fountain of their living hopes.
You are, in dignity and power, Our Lady.
All who, in wanting grace, do not seek help
from you, might wish to soar yet lack the wings.

Paradiso 33: 1–15

Here, in his emphasis upon Mary’s dignity, honour and power, Dante brings to a climax a meditation that began in the *Vita nuova* 20, where effectively he re-genders the ethical principles on which human life is founded. In the sonnet ‘*Tanto gentile e tanto onesta...*’ (see introduction to *Inferno*, pp. xxvii–xxxiii) the great male virtues of nobility and self-possession are attributed to Beatrice. But the foundation on which these virtues rest is no longer the male ego. On the contrary, in Beatrice’s case, such qualities are all achieved in and through the cultivation of humility. If Beatrice displays perfection and poise, it is precisely because she goes ‘be

nignamente d'umilta vestuta – ‘clothed with all goodness in humility’. It is this quality that Mary herself is now shown supremely to exemplify. The same humility in the face of an utterly transcendent power is the principle on which all creation is built. This is the condition which, in theological terms, allows us to admit that the phenomena of the universe are nothing more than figures and analogies for the eternal life, and yet still to recognize that these phenomena offer reliable evidence of our ability to participate in the processes of existence. Few notions seem to have seized Dante’s imagination more securely than this. So, at *Paradiso* 23 he simultaneously speaks of the second appearance of Christ in his narrative as the manifestation of life in its fullness. He does not, however, attempt to describe this power – as, for example, Michelangelo does in depicting the Christ of the Last Judgement in the Sistine Chapel. Dante’s description is rather of the ‘court’ of Christ which is ruled over by the Virgin Mary, who here is shown to receive the message of the angels at the Annunciation. In a spirit of Marian humanism, the canto ranges over the details of the created order – seen almost without exception in a feminine aspect – as if they were luminous panes in a stained-glass window, recognizing that each is, potentially, a God-bearing image. Beatrice is here. But so in the extended simile that opens the canto is a mother bird, closely observed at a moment before the sun has fully risen, eagerly teetering on the tip of a branch as she awaits the opportunity to go out in search of the food that will sustain her nestlings:

Compare: a bird, among her well-loved boughs,
has rested all night long while things lie hid,
poised where her dear brood sleeps within their nest;
and then, to glimpse the looks she’s longed to see,
and find the food her fledglings feed upon
(these efforts weigh with her as pure delight)

before dawn comes she mounts an open sprig,
and there, her heart ablaze, awaits the sun,
eyes sharpening, fixed, till day is truly born.

So too, head raised, tall, straight my *donna* stood,
attention wholly on that stretch of sky
where, under noon, the sun displays least speed.

And I, to see her stand enraptured so,
became like one desiring still what he
has not – and yet in hope is satisfied.

But little time went by between these two –
I mean my waiting, and my seeing now
the skies that, brightening still, grew yet more bright.

And ‘Look!’ Beatrice said. ‘Triumphing,
the soldiery of Christ, and all the yield,
brought from the orbit of the farthest spheres!’

Comedy and Silence: Author and Reader in the *Paradiso*

In the canto describing the court of Heaven, Beatrice smiles, and Dante confesses that he cannot describe the effect of the smile:

Even if all those voices were to sound
that Polyhymnia and her sister muses
fed on their sweetest milk so richly once,
and aid me, singing of that holy smile
and how her holy look grew purer still,
I'd still not reach one thousandth of the truth.

Paradiso 23: 54–59

These lines represent a particularly rich example of a feature that recurs in every canto of the *Paradiso*. Confronting the extreme intensity of his own religious experience, Dante time and again declares that he is incapable of finding words to express that experience, or even at times of remembering what it was like. And therefore, he usually says, he will not even make the attempt. So (as in the continuation of the passage quoted above), finding his track cut off, he is constrained to ‘make a leap’ over the gap in silence. The *Paradiso*, it seems, despite the coherence of its narrative structure and its richness of linguistic texture, inspired as it might be ‘by Polyhymnia and her sister muses’, is a work which is constantly interrupted by silence and by a repeated recognition of human inadequacy. What, finally, are the implications of this for the view we take of Dante’s procedure as author of the poem or for our own reading of the work? What does it mean when an author as ambitious as Dante, and so aware of his own poetic capabilities, confesses to such shortcomings as these? What is the reader to gain from a work that apparently fails to deliver a complete understanding at precisely those points, concerning the nature of beatitude or the truth of God, which would seem to be its central subject?

To some, these confessions can easily be explained as a rhetorical device – the so-called ‘inexpressibility *topos*’ – by which, since antiquity, poets have made protestations of this sort only to draw attention, disingenuously, to their actual success in doing what they said they could not do. Or else the modesty of a poet’s profession might be taken as an enhancement of the subject he is writing about: such-and-such a lord or lady or horse or chariot simply begs description.

There can be no doubt that Dante is aware of such oratorical practices, and the irony often is that the inexpressibility *topos* elicits from him (as above)

some of his most highly wrought and complex poetry. For all that, there is reason to argue that, when Dante confesses the inadequacy of his words, he means what he says, and that, consequently, his readers will need to recognize that the work before them is not intended ultimately to provide a full record of religious experience or a comprehensive map of the nature of divinity.

Some of the arguments for this interpretation (which will be pursued further in the commentaries and notes) relate directly to a theological understanding – sometimes described as ‘negative theology’ or ‘apophaticism’ – which insists that, logically, the words and works of a finite creature can never define or comprehend the nature of an infinite creator. This is anything but a counsel of despair. As in the thinking of Aquinas, this fundamental truth, once it is fully acknowledged, simply tells us what the nature of our words is: knowing that we can only speak of God by analogy, we none the less recognize that our analogies represent a language sanctioned for our use and are reliable in forming our minds, individually and communally, to a proper relationship with our Creator. It is this logical humility which Dante shares with Aquinas.

Though Dante has the reputation of an encyclopedist and does indeed share with the rationalists of his day an appetite for the widest and most varied reaches of learning, there is at the core of his poetics a radical humility which begins in the *Vita nuova*, runs as a subtext beneath all his scientific and philosophical writings, only to re-emerge with great force in the *Paradiso*. For it is, first and last, in his attempts to write about Beatrice that Dante most fully realizes the significance of the inexpressibility *topos*. It is the turning point of the *Vita nuova* when, in chapter 20, Dante realizes that his purpose in writing is not in any sense to possess her or ‘exhaust’ her praises. Dante, at this point in his career (as in *Inferno* 18), is deeply aware of how poetry can be used as a form of rhetorical flattery. But praise is different from flattery. It is the admission, in disinterested love, of features in the existence of another human person that cannot be circumscribed. It is this attitude that Dante reiterates in *Paradise* 23 in his treatment of Beatrice’s smile. But by now there are two extensions to his original understanding. One is that the human person, as a creation of God, is only fully understood, as Beatrice is, by the God who created her. The second is that the person of God as such can only be approached in a comparable attitude of praise.

But what of the consequences for the reader of the *Paradiso*? In parallel

with the inexpressibility *topos* (though less frequent in occurrence), there is a series of addresses to the reader running throughout the third *cantica* which makes clear that the reading of this work cannot simply be a matter of reading for information or instruction concerning the life of Heaven. Thus, almost at the outset, Dante speaks to the reader:

You in that little boat who, listening hard,
have followed, from desire to hear me through,
behind my bowsprit singing on its way,
now turn, look back and mark your native shores.
Do not set out upon these open seas
lest losing me you end confused and lost.
The waves I ride have never yet been crossed.
Minerva breathes. Apollo leads me on.
The nine bright Muses point the Ursa-stars.
You other few who have already stretched,
straight-necked, through time to reach for angel-bread
(the food we live by here, unsatisfied)
may to good purpose set your vessel out across
the deep salt swell, and plough my wake
before the waters level once again.

Paradiso 2: 1–15

It is sometimes supposed that Dante is distinguishing here between the erudite and the unlettered reader, demanding that those who are not already competent in theology should not even attempt to read so learned a work as he means to write. Yet this position attributes an attitude of scholarly superiority to Dante which sits ill with the concern and even affection he displays for those that have followed him thus far through the first two *cantiche* of the *Commedia*. Rather, one should see here the surprising admission that to read the *Paradiso* is a matter of choice, a free act of the will from which some will excuse themselves while others will engage in a full understanding of the conditions under which the work is written. The ‘other few’ will not expect the work to give them everything. They will ‘already’ understand not simply theology but the proper conditions under which any treatment of divine reality must proceed. It will be a voyage on the great sea of being, undertaken as much in collaboration with the author as under his direction. And when the author falls silent or admits his inadequacies, these ‘other few’ will understand the implications of his silence.

The peculiarly Christian character of the collaboration which Dante envisages here is defined by a later passage in which he claims for the first time to have seen the figure of Christ in the heavens, blazing from the arms of the cross that the souls of the courageous have formed. As ever, the figure

is not described. But in the space opened up by Dante's acceptance of the ineffable, those who know what it is to follow Christ will excuse any such failing:

And here remembering surpasses skill:
that cross, in sudden flaring, blazed out Christ
so I can find no fit comparison.
But those who take their cross and follow Christ,
will let me off where, wearily I fail,
seeing in that white dawn, as lightning, Christ.

Paradiso 14: 103–8

Once again, narrative takes the place of instruction. The finite creature is always on the way to understanding, and will not seek it where it cannot be achieved. But there is another, less laborious way in which to view the implications of Dante's position. For it is precisely the same abandonment of any ambition to circumscribe the divine that leads Dante back to the smile that so characterizes Beatrice's presence in the *Paradiso* and justifies our describing the *Paradiso* as a comedy. In a certain sense, the *Paradiso* may best be read as a pure exercise in imagination and intellect or, in other words, as a game. As with any game, the readers here ('few' as they may be) will consciously have *chosen* to play, freely accepting the conditions under which the game will evolve, and expecting nothing save the pleasure of the game itself. In the language game of the *Paradiso*, Dante's words are confessedly dis severed from any absolute connection with the truth. None the less, they display the full range of possibilities of human language, and are capable also of drawing others, in their appreciation of Dante's linguistic games, to enter into a similar exercise of their God-given talents. In this regard, Dante's poetic text is comparable to nature itself, being always at a remove from the infinite yet also infinitely interesting and worthy of attention. Thus, at the beginning of *Paradiso* 13 (which is otherwise dominated by the voice of Saint Thomas Aquinas), Dante wishes to describe the dance performed by the Christian philosophers, each contributing a peculiar luminosity of his own to the pattern of the dance. Select, says Dante, fifteen stars from the brightest that shine in the sky, one from this constellation, one from that – and so on through a passage of some eighteen lines duration. And what is the result of this? Having mentally taken apart and reconfigured the familiar design of the natural constellations, the reader will still have only a shadowy image – and scarcely that – of the sight that Dante saw:

Imagine, if you truly want to know

what I saw now – and while I'm speaking grip
 this image firm, as though a steady rock –
 some fifteen stars, from various demesnes,
 that bring the heavens to life with light so clear
 they overcome the thickest weave of air.
 Imagine, too, the Wain which needs, by day or night,
 no arc more ample than our lap of sky –
 its turning plough shaft never lost to view.
 Imagine, too, the bell mouth of the Horn,
 its point beginning at the axle end
 round which the wheel that starts the cosmos rolls.
 Imagine these all forming, in the sky,
 two signs among themselves (as when the child
 of Minos, Ariadne, felt death's chill)
 so that the rays of one contained the next
 and each was now revolving differently,
 one set in this direction, one in that,
 you'll have a shade then, almost, of that true
 constellation – of the dance that, doubled,
 circled around the point where I was now.

Paradiso 13:1–21

The reader's expectations are defeated, though, as natural phenomena,
 even after so much expense of effort, fail to describe fully the supernatural
 reality. Yet there is no sense of defeat or anxiety in this. Nor should there be.
 The universe – in parallel with Dante's poem – has revealed its truly comic
 reality as the delightful plaything on which human intelligence can exercise
 itself. Creation, and all the questions that it raises, is best understood with a
 smile, as Dante finds when he encounters the laughter of the universe as it
 responds to his enquiry in *Paradiso* 27: 4–6 as if it were not some grimly
 efficient machine but an intelligent presence:

And what I saw, it seemed, was now the laughter
 of the universe. So drunkenness, for me,
 came in through hearing and, no less, through sight.

The fullest exercise of intelligence, however, for Dante lies not in our
 relationship with things but in the relationships we establish with other
 persons. Dante discovered this first in his devotion to Beatrice. He realizes to
 the full what this must mean in his encounter with the face of God – who is
 the source of all relationship. Similarly, for the reader of the *Paradiso*, like its
 author, questions concerning moon spots, the hierarchical order of the angels,
 the disposition of souls in the Empyrean and so on are best approached not in
 a spirit of dogged discipleship but as a playful engagement with Dante's own
 mind at the height of its powers.

A Note on Dante's Terminology

The items included in the glossary below all present particular difficulties for the translator of the *Commedia* and for its twenty-first century reader. Some are terms (such as *fine*, *lume*, *sustanza*) which Dante drew from the philosophy and theology of his own times. Others are words (such as *donna*, *mirare* and *valore*) which the poet endowed with particular significance in the course of his career, having in certain cases begun to consider and define their importance in works as early as the *Vita nuova* and the *Convivio*.

In most of these cases, the translator would, in principle, have wished to render the repeated use that Dante makes of a term by a comparable repetition in English. However, various considerations make this difficult to achieve and, at times, undesirable to attempt. Dante's words often have many facets of meaning. According to context, one aspect of the original word may come to predominate over another, and thus demand a different treatment in English. Or else (in a verse translation, though not usually in prose) the rhythm or euphony of the English text may require a departure from exact equivalence. Verse translators are concerned not only with exact meaning but also with the formal properties of the original, with the effects of metre and lexical variety which, especially in the *Paradiso*, constantly animate even the most rigorous of Dante's verses.

Many of the words listed below also appear in the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*. It may well also be a profitable exercise to follow the different uses of a particular term throughout the *Commedia*.

Beato: This may be literally translated as 'blessed', but that should not obscure the technical sense (preserved in the English phrases 'beatific vision' or 'beatification') in which it refers specifically to the vision of God, or the notion of beatification or sainthood. In many cases, too, the affective resonance of *beato* is richer than its direct English equivalent suggests, carrying suggestions of ecstatic happiness (as at *Paradiso* 10: 102.). *Beato* is also the root of the name that Dante reserves for his Florentine lady Beatrice – she who actively 'brings happiness about' or 'moves' the observer to happiness. (*Beato* in its various forms occurs at

Paradiso 1: 23; 3: 79; 9: 20 and 74; 10: 102; 11: 44; 18: 2; 21: 20; 25: 127; 27: 17 and 28: 110.)

Bontà: This may be translated as ‘goodness’, ‘kindness’ or ‘worthiness’, and in ordinary Italian may have no greater meaning than that. However, Dante greatly enriches the word. In *Convivio* 4: 2, 11, he interprets the word thus: ‘I state that my theme is that of “*bontà*” whose possession makes a person truly noble. *Bontà* can be used in a variety of senses; here it means a natural capacity, or better, an excellence bestowed by nature.’ The word is thus directly associated with the words *virtù* and *valore* discussed below. It is in this sense that the word can be attributed to the Virgin Mary (*Paradiso* 33: 21) or to God (*Paradiso* 7: 104–11). (*Bontà* occurs at *Paradiso* 2:148; 7: 64,108 and 109; 25: 66; 28: 67; 31: 6. The form *bontate* occurs at 19: 128; 2: 136; 5: 20; 13: 58; 26: 30; 29: 59; 31: 83 and 33: 21.)

Cielo: Though *cielo* can signify the physical atmosphere surrounding the earth, in the *Paradiso* it also signifies Heaven or Paradise itself. It is the cosmographical term used to refer to each of the revolving planetary spheres, as at *Paradiso* 8:37. (There are approximately eighty instances of *cielo*, *ciel* or *cieli* in the *Paradiso*.)

Cortesia: Courtesy was a notion of central importance to the literature and even the ethical thinking of the medieval period. At its simplest, the notion refers to the virtues and social graces increasingly cultivated in a feudal court. Dante frequently depicts Paradise as the court of Heaven ruled over by God. But in doing so he insists upon a moral definition of the term (and its cognates, such as *cortese*: ‘courteous’). In *Convivio* 2: 10, 8 he declares that *Cortesia* and human goodness are the same thing’. In *Purgatorio* 13 and 14 (see commentaries on these cantos) he distinguishes between the false court, where only superficial elegance is cultivated, and the true court, where the ethical merits of its individual members are recognized. In this sense, it is not surprising to see God described, as early as the *Vita nuova* 42 as ‘He who is the Lord of Courtesy’. Nor will it seem strange to hear God’s actions described by Dante as acts of courtesy, when calling Beatrice to his presence. For Dante, courtesy, alongside the traditional principles of rational and theological virtue, is a scheme of moral recognition which allows the particular merits of particular individuals to be acknowledged. Thus, in *Paradiso* 7: 91, where he deals with the central doctrine of Christian belief, Dante speaks daringly of God’s ‘courtesy’ in

allowing, through the supreme sacrifice of the Atonement, human beings to achieve redemption from the sin of Adam. (*Cortesia* also occurs at *Paradiso* 12: 143 and 17: 71. The adjective *cortese* appears at *Paradiso* 9: 58, 12: 111 and 15: 48.)

Donna: It is rarely sufficient to translate Dante's '*donna*' with the English 'lady'. The English word may once have evoked the notions of courtly devotion that *donna* carries with it. But class and gender politics have rendered this word hard to use with the seriousness that Dante attaches to *donna*. For him the word is part of a courtly and poetic vocabulary, which acquires almost technical significance in the love lyric that was the avant-garde literature of his day. (See commentary to *Purgatorio* 26.) His interest in and development of the traditional word is evident from his readiness, especially in the *Paradiso*, to form neologisms out of the root word or embellish it with decorative flourishes, as in the case of *donneare* (*Paradiso* 24: 118 and 27: 88) and *indonnare*.

In the innumerable instances of the word, this translation has usually retained the Italian *donna*, in the hope that the slight strangeness (though easy intelligibility) of the phrase will diminish modern associations with 'lady'. In the case of neologisms, the need is to register the effect of a daring linguistic experiment while not denying the English reader access to the meaning and formation of that word. 'Lady' does re-appear in some of these cases.

Fine: This word has implications drawn from Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and Scholastic philosophy which might be rendered as 'end' in the sense of 'aim', 'goal', 'defining purpose' or *telos*. An 'end' in this sense is the ultimate or 'final' rationale for the existence of any particular being, that goal to which all its operations, drives, dispositions and desires and 'virtues' (see below) are directed. (*Paradiso* 1: 107; 2: 120; 8: 104; 11: 42; 22: 35; 27: 60; 28: 52; 33: 46.)

Forma: This is a central term in Aristotelian philosophy – usually translated as 'form'. In its technical sense, 'form' is that which determines the mode of being in any created object and its natural inclinations. (Matter, by contrast, is the potentiality to receive form, as, for instance, in the case of iron, which has the potentiality to take on the form of a knife, though matter may in some measure be resistant to form.) The planetary heavens were thought to exert an astral influence, disposing matter in plants and animals to receive form. The angels as spiritual beings exist as pure form,

separate from matter. These conceptions are particularly important in *Paradiso* 29. See also *Purgatorio* 25 and the commentary on that canto. (*Forma* occurs at *Paradiso* 1: 104 and 127; 4: 54; 18: 111; 20: 23 and 29; 24: 128; 29: 22; 30: 61; 31: 1 and 52; 33:91.)

Gloria: This word, which occurs in the first line of the *Paradiso*, carries – as do its cognates such as *glorioso*: ‘glorious’ – biblical, theological, liturgical and also military associations, while at the same time being central to Dante’s celebration of Beatrice. Though ‘glory’ and ‘glorious’ are the usual translations given here, the word is rarely used as casually as regular English usage suggests.

In Latin the word derives from *gloriari* – ‘to boast’ – and thus can be associated with triumphal displays of power and merit, as in *Paradiso* 23: 139. (See also the verb *gloriare* as used at *Paradiso* 16: 2 and 6; 24: 44.) In biblical terms the word refers to the display of God’s power and beauty in the created world, thus referring to the glory of God, his majesty, power and light. These are the visible manifestations of divine light (though distinct from God himself). Psalm 19, among many others, uses ‘glory’ in this sense: ‘The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork.’ The ancient hymn ‘Glory to God in the Highest’ is sung early in the liturgy of the Mass. (Compare *Paradiso* 27: 2.)

From the *Vita nuova* onwards Dante associates the word with Beatrice, as when he describes her there as ‘*la gloriosa donna della mia mente*’ – ‘the glorious sovereign lady of my mind’. In the *Paradiso* the full meaning of such designations becomes clear. Beatrice is the principal reflection of divine light to Dante. She also reflects the triumph of the Creator over death, in that it is through her death that Dante realizes the full significance of the Resurrection. In this sense, too, human flesh is referred to in *Paradiso* 14: 43 as the ‘*la came gloriosa e santa*’ – ‘the glorious and sacred flesh’. Here, as with Beatrice, the human form is celebrated as God’s ultimate creation and triumph. (*Gloria* occurs at *Paradiso* 1: 1; 6: 90; 9: 124; 11: 96; 12: 36; 19: 14; 23: 139; 25: 68; 27: 2 and 62.; 31: 5; 33: 71, The adjective *glorioso* occurs at 2: 16; 10:145; 14: 6 and 43; 16: 151; 18: 83; 20: 112; 22: 112; 25: 23; 31: 60; 32: 28. The adverb *gloriosamente* occurs at 11: 12.)

Larghezza: This word may refer to spatial expanse. It also carries the meaning of generosity – particularly, as in the English ‘largesse’, the generosity shown by a feudal lord to his servants. At *Convivio* 2: 10: 7,

Dante writes: '*Larghezza* is a particular form of courtesy.' (See *Cortesia* above.) When Dante refers to God's *larghezza*, he frequently intends to represent the expanse and amplitude of the created universe as a gift freely given by a lord to his loyal servants. The word also as applied to God signifies the complete freedom of God, displayed particularly in the giving of gifts of existence, as in *Convivio* 3: 6: 10: 'God's *larghezza* is never constrained by necessity.' The translation has attempted in various ways to retain a connection between freedom, generosity and space, as for instance at *Paradiso* 5: 19, God's 'spacious deed'. (*Larghezza* occurs at *Paradiso* 5: 19; 25: 29; 28: 32; 30: 116. The verb *largire* – to give generously – occurs at 22: 118; 23: 86; 24: 71. The adjective *largo*, which also means amplitude, occurs in a kindred sense at 7: 115; 9: 55; 24: 91.)

Luce/lume: *Luce* and *lume*, although used as general words for 'light', also demonstrate – along with two related words, *raggio* and *splendore* – Dante's scientific interest in the working of light and the operations of perception. In the *Convivio* 3: 14: 5, he writes:

Since mention has been made of '*luce*' and '*splendore*', I shall explain the difference between them... to make my meaning perfectly clear. Philosophers are accustomed to call light '*luce*' when it is considered in its source, '*raggio*' when it is considered in its medium, that is, from the source to the first body, where it terminates, and '*splendore*' when it is reflected into another illuminated area.

The three Italian words discussed here are related to three Latin terms, drawn from the natural philosophy of Dante's day, *lux*, *lumen* and *splendor*. According to Boyde, a distinction needs to be made between three phases in the process of illumination. Light is called *lux* – or *luce* in Italian – when it refers to a light source such as the sun. It is called, specifically, *lumen*–*lume* in Italian – when it is present in a diaphanous medium such as the atmosphere. In such instances, light brings into action the light-bearing capacity of a transparent medium. Dante avoids the ambiguity that can arise in the use of *lumen*, as both a general and a specific term, by employing the term *raggio* (derived from the Latin *radius*, or light ray) to refer to the manifestation of light in a diaphanous medium. Finally, *splendor* – *splendore* in Italian – refers to any illumination that is caused indirectly by the reflection of rays from an opaque body, such as a white wall, or a reflective body. In addition, Dante also speaks of '*luce divina*' – 'divine light'. This is not a physical light, but the purely intellectual light of grace – which is experienced in the Empyrean when Dante comes directly into God's presence. (See especially *Paradiso* 30: 40 and 100–102.)

Dante makes systematic use of light terminology throughout his poem, but see particularly *Paradiso* 2. In translation, it is not difficult to make the distinctions that Dante makes. However, unless the reader recognizes that words such as splendour are used in a technical sense, there is a danger that a merely impressionistic reading will be substituted for the hard thinking that Dante requires.

There are approximately seventy occurrences of *luce* in the *Paradiso* – not to mention cognates such as the adjectives *lucido* and *lucente* – and over fifty of *lume*. Some significant instances of *luce* are at *Paradiso* 2: 36 and 145; 5: 8; 6: 128; 11: 39; 17: 12,1; 21: 100; 28: 23; 30: 40; 31: 22 and 28; 33: 67, 83, 100 and 124. Significant occurrences of *lume* are to be found at *Paradiso* 1: 75, 82 and 122; 2: 65, 81, 101, 130; 14: 47; 18: 19; 21: 32; 22: 32; 26: 70; 30: 61, 100, 112, 116, 128; 33: 43, 90, 110, 116, 128. Significant cases of *raggio* (which occurs thirty times) are at *Paradiso* 5: 137; 9: 114; 14: 51 and 115; 18: 120; 19: 5; 23: 79 and 83; 30: 106; 31: 99 33: 53 and 77. *Splendore* or *isplendore* (leaving aside derivatives such as *risplendere*) occur at *Paradiso* 3: 109; 5: 103; 9: 13; 10: 62; 11: 39; 14: 95; 21: 13 and 32; 26: 72; 29: 14 and 138; 30: 97; 31: 21.)

Mirare: This word signifies the act of looking but carries a particular emphasis on concentration and focused attention. In this respect it is associated with the notion of target or aim. It is also associated etymologically with *miracolo* – ‘miracle’ – a sign from God demanding one’s fixed attention, and with *ammirazione* — ‘admiration’ – in the strong sense of contemplative concentration. The adjective *mirabile* denotes that which deserves attention, as does the more elevated Latinate form, *miro*. Many of these words are associated with Dante’s perception of Beatrice as a miraculous demonstration of God’s power. The English word ‘gaze’ suggests far too abstracted an attention. ‘Wonder’ is probably the best translation, though other words are also used here to capture the intensity of intelligent vision implied by Dante’s Italian usage. (*Mirare* occurs at *Paradiso* 6: 86; 7: 62; 13: 46; 14: 132; 15: 62; 17: 17; 18: 34; 25: 17; 28: 43; 30: 128; 31: 128; 31: 109; 32: 37 and 134; 33: 98, 99 and 110. *Mirabile* occurs at *Paradiso* 2: 25; 3: 58; 11: 95; 12: 65; 13: 32; 16: 4 and 85; 22: 96; 28: 76; 30: 63. *Miro* occurs at *Paradiso* 14: 24; 24: 36; 28: 53; 30: 68. *Miracolo* occurs at *Paradiso* 18: 63 and 24: 107. *Ammirazione* occurs at *Paradiso* 2: 56 and 32: 92. The verb *ammirare* occurs at

Paradiso 1: 98; 28: 137 and 33: 96.)

Ombra: Literally translated as ‘shadow’. As well as referring to the shadows cast by physical light, and sometimes to the ‘shades’ of the dead, *ombra* can also have a more technical sense, sometimes associated with the theology of Saint Bonaventura. (See commentary on *Paradiso* 12.) In such cases, it may refer to images in the natural world or in thought that stand as manifestations of God. (See *Paradiso* 1: 22–4, also 3: 114; 5: 107; 6: 7; 13: 19. Compare also *umbriferi prefazi* at *Paradiso* 30: 78.)

Perfezione: This can be translated by forms of the English ‘perfection’. But there is a philosophical aspect to the word that signifies the complete realization of all the potentialities that reside in any particular form of life – the achievement of an end or goal. (See *Fine* above.) As in Scholastic philosophy, the word is frequently synonymous with *actus* – in Italian, *atto*. In *Convivio* 3: 12: 12 God is spoken of as ‘the supreme *atto*, the supreme *perfezione* and source of every *perfezione*’. In the case of human beings ‘human *perfezione* is specifically the *perfezione* of reason’ (*Convivio* 3: 15: 4). (*Perfezion(e)* occurs at *Paradiso* 6: no; 13: 81 and 83; 29: 45. Its cognate *perfetto* occurs at 5: 5; 32: 83; 33: 105 and *perfettamente* at 31: 95.)

Ridere: In *Convivio* 3: 8: 11 Dante writes:

The soul reveals itself in the mouth, rather like colour behind glass. And what is laughter if not a corruscation of the soul’s delight, that is, a light appearing externally which corresponds to the state of being within?

There is sometimes a tendency in translation to mute the importance and effect of laughter in Dante’s text. While it is true that he does not approve of raucous laughter, he still sees laughter as a subtle expression of spiritual energy. Thus the universe is said to laugh in delighted welcome at Dante’s arrival in *Paradiso* 29. To translate this as ‘smile’ would be to play too safe. So, too, to represent Beatrice as smiling decorously at Dante, as is often the case, is to deprive the *Paradiso* of much of its vitality. (See *Paradiso* 5: 81, 97 and 126; 6: 131; 9: 103; 10: 61 and 118; 16: 14; 17: 121; 21: 4 and 63; 22: 11; 23: 26; 25: 28 and 135; 29: 116; 30: 77; 31: 134.)

Salute: The word *salute* appears over fifty times in Dante’s work as a whole; in each case he is concerned to attach to it a significant double meaning, referring simultaneously to ‘greeting’ and to ‘salvation’ or ‘health’. In the *Vita nuova* Dante’s well-being depends upon whether or not Beatrice grants him a greeting, and in the course of the work this understanding

deepens to the point at which his spiritual salvation depends on her regard for him. She is in that double sense the '*donna de la salute*' in the *Vita nuova* 34. But Beatrice in the *Paradiso* is the figure who prepares Dante to receive, in both senses, God's 'salute'. (*Salute* occurs at *Paradiso* 8: 102; 12: 63; 14: 84; 22: 124; 28: 67 and 68; 30: 53; 31: 80; 32: 77; 33: 27.)

Sustanza: This term derives from Aristotelian usage and denotes any individual being or thing. (See commentary on *Purgatorio* 25.) Angels can be referred to as substances – or as 'separate substances', in that they are separated from matter. (See *Forma* above and especially *Paradiso* 29.) To subsist in Paradise is to enjoy the independent existence given by the Creator. (*Sustanza* occurs at *Paradiso* 3: 29; 7: 5; 14: 14; 15: 18; 23: 32; 24: 64, 69 and 75; 26: 39; 28: 75; 29: 32 and 76; 33: 88.)

Valore: In *Convivio* 4: 2: 11, Dante writes that '*valore*' can be understood in a number of different ways, but in one particular sense may be taken to mean the 'power of nature or the goodness given by nature'. In the *Paradiso* the word can also be used directly of God, as in *Paradiso* 10: 3.

There are some similarities in meaning between *valore* and *virtù* (see below), and 'power' and 'strength' may at times be an appropriate translation. But worth and value are also implied here, so that the word may signify the perfection or full realization of all virtues in one individual. In this sense, the word has some of the chivalric associations that are found in the English word 'prowess', thus, like *larghezza* and *cortesia* above, drawing upon the field of courtly values which help Dante regularly to define his theological and philosophical concerns, especially when dealing with matters of love. Valour and prowess are displayed in the pursuit of a lady or *donna* such as Beatrice, and in that sense the word indicates the power of love. It is significant that the major Italian dictionary insists that *valore* can signify a 'value' in moral nature, as opposed to an economic value. This points to a crucial distinction that Dante tacitly draws between the value which is intrinsic to our ethical natures and market or commercial value. Much of his thinking, especially in his more polemical passages, is concerned with the ways in which the capitalism of his own day displaced and travestied the value that resides, inalienably, in human persons as creatures of God.

Though 'worth' is the usual translation here, 'value', 'prowess' and 'might' occasionally occur. (See *Paradiso* 1: 14 and 107; 5: 3; 26 and 62; 9: 105; 10: 3 and 29; 13: 45; 14: 42; 19: 43 and 126; 21: 15; 26: 42; 29:

143; 33:81.)

Virtù: There are some ninety occurrences of this word in the *Commedia* at large, and it is probably the most significant single term in the *Paradiso*. The modern English ‘virtue’ is rarely an adequate translation. For Dante, the moral implications of virtue are directly related to the inner strength, characteristics and excellence which God, as Creator, has instilled into every created being. Geoffrey Chaucer reflects a similar usage when he writes:

Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote
And bathed every veyne in swich licour
Of which vertu engendred is the flour...
General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales* 1–4

In *Convivio* 4: 16:7 a *virtù* is defined as

a principle of activity. The perfection [see *Perfezione*, above] of every being or particular nature coincides with the achievement of its proper and specific *virtù*.

In this sense, the ‘virtues’ are active qualities (as compared with passive potentialities) (see Boyde, p. 126). They are analogous to the effects of cold and heat in that they enable a given body to exert an influence on others. It is ‘virtue’ that drives an animal in the food chain actively to seek and consume the nourishment it needs. Even minerals have ‘virtues’, insofar as they absorb the elements that make them what they are. The astral bodies have ‘virtues’ which they exert on the world beneath. (See, especially, *Paradiso* 2: 127, 139 and throughout the canto; also *Paradiso* 10: 17.) The angels (which are, as discussed under *Sustanza*, above, are separate from matter) exert their influence over the planetary heavens, as discussed in *Paradiso* 28, especially at lines 65 – 73. God is the supreme virtue. Thus, at *Paradiso* 18: 119, Dante calls upon God to cleanse the world from sin as Christ once cleansed the temple of corruption. At *Paradiso* 1: 22 the poet invokes ‘*divina virtù*’, asking that he should be ‘lent’ sufficient power to record some part of his heavenly vision. In human beings, generally, ‘virtues’ are both physical – as in the ‘virtues’ of the eyes – and rational – as in, say, the pursuit of justice. (See also *Purgatorio* 25 and the commentary on that canto.) It is consistent with Dante’s Aristotelian ethics that human beings should be called upon to display their rational and moral strengths, in the same way as a gymnast might train in some particular exercise. In Paradise, God’s virtue, through grace, elevates human strengths above both the physical and rational power it possesses on earth (as at *Paradiso* 30: 57).

Virtù, then, is far wider in its meaning than most English equivalents, requiring a translation which reflects, according to context, the notions of power, strength and purpose that the Italian word expresses.

(*Virtù* or its conjugates *virtude* and *virtute* occur at *Paradiso* 1: 22, 56 and 125; 2: 68, 70, 113, 127, 139, 143; 3: 71; 4: 141; 6: 34; 7: 25, 72, 135 and 137; 8: 98; 10: 17; 11: 57; 12: 59; 13: 74 and 80; 14: 82; 17: 83; 18: 60, 111 and 119; 21: 85; 22: 102, 113 and 122; 23: 36 and 85; 24: 90; 25: 60 and 83; 26: 12, 84 and 87; 27: 97 and 111; 28: 65, 73 and 122; 30: 57 and 99; 31: 84.)

Further Reading

- Auerbach, E., *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton, 1953).
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- , *The Undivine Comedy: Demythologizing Dante* (Princeton, 1992). Interesting attempts to detach Dante's poem from an over-insistence on moral issues and reveal the virtuosity of Dante's fiction in creating a 'hall of mirrors'.
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- , *Perception and Passion in Dante's Comedy* (Cambridge, 1993)
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- Curtius, E. R., *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York, 1953). Dante seen as the culminating figure in the tradition of medieval Latinity.
- Davis, C. T., *Dante and the Idea of Rome* (Oxford, 1957). An important study of Dante's political thinking.
- Dronke, P., *Dante and Medieval Latin Traditions* (Cambridge 1986). Detailed essays on Dante's use of classical and medieval motifs.
- Eliot, T. S., *Dante* (London, 1929). Not in itself a particularly illuminating essay, but crucial in pointing to issues that would concern Eliot as a poet throughout his long apprenticeship to Dante.
- Fergusson, F., *Dante* (New York, 1966). A stimulating introduction by a passionate Dantist.
- Foster, K., *The Two Dantes* (London, 1977). The most penetrating study available of Dante's conception of free will and love.
- Freccero, J. ed., *Dante: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, 1965).
- , *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (Gloucester MA, 1973)
- , *The Poetics of Conversion* (Cambridge MA, 1986). Freccero's edited volume includes extremely important essays on Dante's philosophy of love and learning and also on his poetic experimentalism.
- Gilson, E., *Dante and Philosophy* (London, 1948). An indispensable study of Dante's political theory, by the most influential medievalist of the twentieth century.
- Hawkins, P., *Dante's Testaments* (Stanford CA, 1999). A study of Dante's indebtedness to the Scriptures, notable for its many critical insights.
- Holmes, G., *Dante* (Oxford, 1980). A concise introduction to the history of Dante's time and also to his political theory.
- Jacoff, R. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Dante* (Cambridge, 1993). Good introductory essays on a range of essential subjects.
- Kirkpatrick, R., *Dante's Paradiso and the Limitations of Modern Criticism* (Cambridge, 1978). An analysis of the poetic originality of Dante's *Paradiso*.
- Lansing, R. (ed.), *The Dante Encyclopedia* (New York and London, 2000). A comprehensive study of Dantean issues, drawing on the best of modern scholarship.
- Mandelstam, O., 'Conversation about Dante', in *Collected Critical Prose and Letters*, trans. J. G. Grey (London, 1991). A poet's account – sometimes extravagant but always interesting.
- Mazzeo, J. A., *Structure and Thought in the Paradiso* (Ithaca NY, 1958). A clear overall account of Dante's intellectual plan.
- Mazzotta, G., *Dante's Vision and the Circle of Knowledge* (Princeton, 1993). An excellent scholarly investigation of Dante's Christian philosophy.
- Moevs, C., *The Metaphysics of Dante's Commedia* (Oxford, 2005). A brilliant account of Dante's theology.

Turner, D., *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God* (Cambridge, 2004). (A searching account by a leading theologian with a particular sympathy for Dante's work of the general theological questions against which Dante's poem is to be viewed.)

Quinones, R., *Dante Alighieri* (Boston, 1979). A good account, especially of historical themes in the *Commedia*.

A Note on the Manuscript Tradition

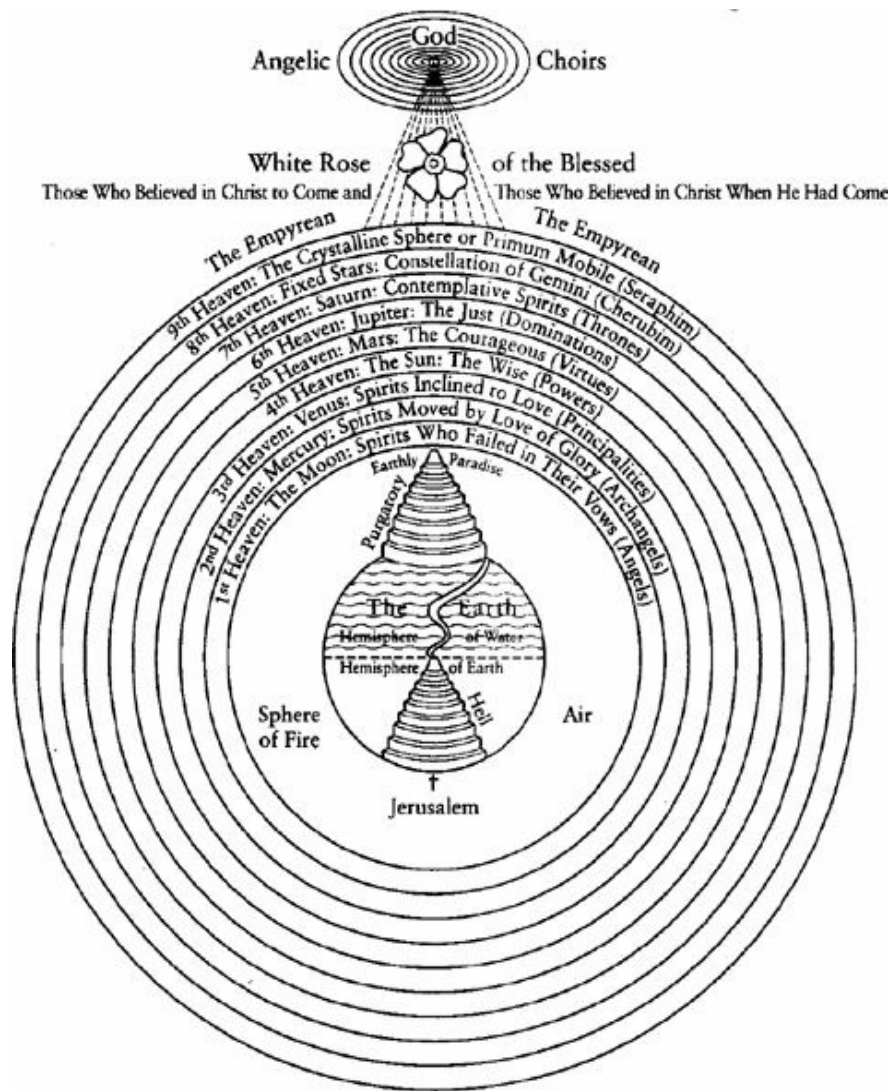
Dante appears to have published parts of the *Commedia* in manuscript form before the work as a whole was completed. The *Inferno* appeared around 1315 and the *Purgatorio* around 1320, a year before the author's death, by which time groups of cantos from the *Paradiso* may also have been available to patrons. No manuscript in Dante's own hand has ever been identified. But the immediate popularity of the work ensured that, from the earliest times, there were a great many copies available. The oldest manuscript of the work, complete in all three of its parts, appears to have been produced in Florence between 1330 and 1331. The success of this publication is attested by an anecdote in which a Florentine copyist active in the 1330s is said to have made provision for the dowries of his daughters by producing no less than 100 redactions of the *Commedia*. A further wave – of largely *de luxe* editions, produced in Tuscany, beyond the walls of Florence – began to emerge in the 1350s. This second tradition seems to have been stimulated by the interest that Boccaccio took in Dante's poem. Boccaccio himself seems to have copied out the *Commedia* at least three times, and had one of these copies delivered to Petrarch in Avignon in 1351. In all, something approaching 900 manuscripts were available before printed editions began to appear in 1472. These editions, too, of which there were many, sold rapidly. They included an octave edition in 1502 from the prestigious house of Aldine – important enough to be pirated in the same year at Lyons. No less than 100 of the early manuscripts were scrupulously illustrated, establishing a collaboration between poet and painter which reached its height in Botticelli's extraordinarily subtle treatment of all of the cantos of the *Commedia* produced in Florence during the 1480s, and which continued unabated in the works of William Blake, Gustave Doré and Tom Phillips.

The text reproduced in the present volume (with, on a few occasions, silent emendation) is that established by Giorgio Petrocchi and first published in 1966–7. Petrocchi's text is based on some thirty of the earliest Florentine manuscripts. Debate continues over the detail of some readings. However, it is a testimony to the clarity of Dante's thought and style that his copyists

seem only rarely to have lapsed in concentration. In very few cases do variant readings lead to significantly different interpretations. This is the more remarkable in that punctuation was negligible in early copies. Dante's use of rhyme and *caesurae* fulfil most of the functions that we now ascribe to punctuation. The scholarly reader, therefore, of both Petrocchi's text and the present translation may reasonably complain at the very high level of editorial punctuation that they both display. Such intrusions may be regretted. Their justification lies in an attempt to articulate and clarify, for readers less agile than Dante's own, the subtlety, nuance and polyphonic variety of the author's original voice.

Italy, c. 1300







COMMEDIA CANTICA 3: PARADISO

Canto 1

[1] La gloria di colui che tutto move
per l'universo penetra, e risplende
in una parte più e meno altrove.

[4] Nel ciel che più de la sua luce prende
fu' io, e vidi cose che ridire
né sa né può chi di là sù discende;

[7] perchè appressando sé al suo disire,
nostro intelletto si profonda tanto,
che dietro la memoria non può ire.

[10] Veramente quant' io del regno santo
ne la mia mente potei far tesoro,
sarà ora materia del mio canto.

[13] O buono Appollo, a l'ultimo lavoro
fammi del tuo valor sì fatto vaso,
ome dimandi a dar l'amato alloro.

[16] Infino a qui l'un giogo di Parnaso
assai mi fu; ma or con amendue
m'è uopo intrar ne l'aringo rimaso.

[19] Entra nel petto mio, e spira tue
sì come quando Marsia traesti
de la vagina de le membra sue.

[22] O divina virtù, se mi ti presti
tanto che l'ombra del beato regno
segnata nel mio capo io manifesti,

[25] vedra'mi al piè del tuo diletto legno
venire, e coronarmi de le foglie
che la materia e tu mi farai degno.

[28] Sì rade volte, padre, se ne coglie
per trionfare o cesare o poeta,
colpa e vergogna de l'umane voglie,

[31] che parturir letizia in su la lieta

delfica deità dovria la fronda
peneia, quando alcun di sé asseta.

[34] Poca favilla gran fiamma seconda:
forse di retro a me con miglior voci
si pregherà perché Cirra risponda.

[37] Surge ai mortali per diverse foci
la lucerna del mondo; ma da quella
che quattro cerchi giugne con tre croci,

[40] con miglior corso e con migliore Stella
esce congiunta, e la mondana cera
più a suo modo tempera e suggella.

[43] Fatto avea di là mane e di qua sera
tal foce, e quasi tutto era là bianco
quello emisferio, e l'altra parte nera,

[46] quando Beatrice in sul sinistro fianco
vidi rivolta e riguardar nel sole:
aguglia sì non li s'affisse unquanco.

[49] E sì come secondo raggio suole
uscir del primo e risalire in suso,
pur come pelegrin che tornar vuole,

[52] così de l'atto suo, per li occhi infuso
ne l'immagine mia, il mio si fece,
e fissi li occhi al sole oltre nostr' uso.

[55] Molto è licito là, che qui non lece
a le nostre virtù, mercé del loco
fatto per proprio de l'umana spece.

[58] Io nol sofferarsi molto, né sì poco,
ch'io nol vedessi sfavillar dintorno,
com' ferro che bogliente esce del foco;

[61] e di subito parve giorno a giorno
essere aggiunto, come quei che puote
avesse il ciel d'un altro sole addorno.

[64] Beatrice tutta ne l'eterno rote
fissa con li occhi stava; e io in lei
le luci fissi, di là sù rimpte.

[67] Nel suo aspetto tal dentro mi fei,
qual si fé Glauco nel gustar de l'erba

che 'l fé consorto in mar de li altri dèi.

[70] Trasumanar significar *per verba*
non si poria; però l'esempio basti
a cui esperienza grazia serba.

[73] S'i' era sol di me quel che creasti
novellamente, amor che 'l ciel governi,
tu 'l sai, che col tuo lume mi levasti.

[76] Quando la rota che tu sempiterni
desiderato, a sé mi fece atteso
con l'armonia che temperi e discerni,

[79] parvemi tanto allor del cielo acceso
de la fiamma del sol, che pioggia o fiume
lago non fece alcun tanto disteso.

[82] La novità del suono e 'l grande lume
di lor cagion m'accesero un disio
mai non sentito di cotanto acume.

[85] Ond' ella, che vedea me sì com' io,
a quïetarmi l'animo commosso,
pria ch'io a dimandar, la bocca aprio

[88] e cominciò: 'Tu stesso ti fai grosso
col falso imaginar, sì che non vedi
ciò che vedresti se l'avessi scosso.

[91] Tu non se' in terra, sì come tu credi;
ma folgore, fuggendo il proprio sito,
non corse come tu ch'ad esso riedi.'

[94] S'io fui del primo dubbio disvestito
per le sorrise parolette brevi,
dentro ad un nuovo più fu' inretito

[97] e dissi: 'Già contento *requievi*
di grande ammirazion; ma ora ammiro
com' io trascenda questi corpi levi.'

[100] Ond' ella, appresso d'un pio sospiro,
li occhi drizzò ver' me con quel sembiante
che madre fa sovra figlio deliro,

[103] e cominciò: 'Le cose tutte quante
hanno ordine tra loro, e questo è forma
che l'universo a Dio fa simigliante.

[106] Qui veggion l'ake creature l'orma
de l'eterno valore, il qual è fine
al quale è fatta la toccata norma.

[109] Ne l'ordine ch'io dico sono accline
tutte nature, per diverse sorti,
più al principio loro e men vicine;

[112] onde si muovono a diversi porti
per lo gran mar de l'essere, e ciascuna
con istinto a lei dato che la porti.

[115] Questi ne porta il foco inver' la luna;
questi ne' cor mortali è permotore;
questi la terra in sé stringe e aduna;

[118] né pur le creature che son fore
d'intelligenza quest' arco saetta,
ma quelle c'hanno intelletto e amore.

[121] La provedenza, che cotanto assetta,
del suo lume fa 'l ciel sempre quieto
nel qual si volge quel c'ha maggior fretta;

[124] e ora lì, come a sito decreto,
cen porta la virtù di quella corda
che ciò che scocca drizza in segno lieto.

[127] Vero è che, come forma non s'accorda
molte fiate a l'intenzion de l'arte,
perch' a risponder la materia e sorda,

[130] così da questo corso si diparte
talor la creatura, c'ha podere
di piegar, così pinta, in altra parte;

[133] e sì come veder si può cadere
foco di nube, sì l'impeto primo
l'atterra torto da falso piacere.

[136] Non dei più ammirar, se bene, stimo,
lo tuo salir, se non come d'un rivo
se d'alto monte scende giuso ad imo.

[139] Maraviglia sarebbe in te se, privo
d'impedimento, giù ti fossi assiso,
com' a terra quiete in foco vivo.'

[142] Quinci rivolse inver' lo cielo il viso.

CANTO 1

[1] Glory, from Him who moves all things that are,
penetrates the universe and then shines back,
reflected more in one part, less elsewhere.

[4] High in that sphere which takes from Him most light
I was – I was! – and saw things there that no one
who descends knows how or ever can repeat.

[7] For, drawing near to what it most desires,
our intellect so sinks into the deep
no memory can follow it that far.

[10] As much, though, truly of that holy realm
as I could keep as treasure in my mind
will now become the substance of my song.

[13] O high Apollo, in this final work, make me
a vessel of your worth as fine as you
demand, in granting longed-for laurel crowns.

[16] So far, one summit of Parnassus' heights
has been enough. In this arena, though,
the task, as I now enter, calls for both.

[19] Enter my heart and breathe in me, as when
you flayed defeated Marsyas, and drew
that satyr and his limbs from sheathing skin.

[22] If you can lend me, from your holy power,
enough so I may manifest the shade
of that rejoicing realm which marks my head,

[25] then to the foot of your beloved bough
I'll come and crown myself with victory leaves –
as you and this great theme will fit me to.

[28] So seldom (fault and shame of human wills!)
are these leaves, greatest Father, gathered up
to celebrate an emperor or poet.

[31] If any, thirsting, freely seeks these fronds
(peneian-branched) there must be, in that joyful
deity of Delphi, joy born anew.

[34] A minute spark precedes a towering flame.

Others may be who, after me, will pray
with better voice towards Apollo's hill.

[37]* Rising, the beacon of the world will come
to mortal eyes through many estuaries,
but shines where four spheres join three cruciforms

[40] with better impetus and better stars,
all in conjunction, and, with its own mark,
more clearly seals and tempers earthly wax.

[43] That surge of sun made morning there, dusk here,
and all that hemisphere was almost white
while, equally, this other part was dark,

[46] when Beatrice turned, as I saw now,
towards her left and, turning, set her eyes –
no eagle so intent – towards the sun.

[49]* As any falcon's searching flight will dive,
then strike back up, or else like reflex rays,
which, angled from the first, return on high,

[52] so, too, her gesture, pouring through my gaze
into imagination, made me turn
and fix my eyes – beyond our norm – straight at the sun.

[55] Much is permitted there that here, on earth,
is not permitted to our human powers,
thanks to that place made, properly, our own.

[58] I could not bear it long yet did not fail
to see, in that brief time, sparks fly around,
as iron from a fire when brought to boil.

[61] Then suddenly it seemed that day and day
were joined, as though – adorned by Him who can –
the skies were lighted by a second sun.

[64] Beatrice remained, her eyes fixed wholly
on the eternal wheels. And my bright glance,
turned back from that above, I fixed on her.

[67] Held in her look, I, inwardly, was made
what Glaucus, tasting grass, was made to be,
consorting with the other ocean gods.

[70] To give (even in Latin phrase) a meaning
to 'transhuman' can't be done. For those whom grace

will grant experience, let my case serve.

[73]* Whether I was no more than soul (which love,
in governing the spheres, made lastly new),

You know, who raised me up through Your pure light.

[76]* When that great wheel – which You, desired by that,
make sempiternal – had, with harmonies
proportionate and clear, made me attend,

[79] the skies of Heaven, it seemed to me, blazed out
so lit by solar flame no lake on earth,
flooded by rain or river, spread so wide.

[82] The newness of the sound and that great light
kindled in me desire to know the cause
sharper than any I have ever felt.

[85] And she who saw me as I am, at this,
to bring some calm to my excited mind,
before I asked her, opening her lips,

[88] began to speak: ‘With false imaginings
you make yourself so dull you fail to see
what, shaking off this cloud, you’d see quite well.

[91] You are not still on earth as you suppose.
No thunderbolt that flees its proper place
ran at such speed as you return to yours.’

[94] If I, by these brief, smiling words of hers,
was disinvested of initial doubt,
then now by new and greater I was caught.

[97]* ‘I rest content,’ I said, ‘in utmost wonder.
So *requievi*. Yet I wonder now
how *I* climb through these light embodiments.’

[100] At this, in deep, affectionate concern,
she sighed and set her eyes on me,
as mothers do when silly sons rave on.

[103] ‘There is,’ she now began, ‘an ordered ratio
between all things there are. It’s this – such *form* –
that makes the universe resemble God.

[106] The highest creatures see the footprints there
of God’s eternal prowess and his worth,
the end to which (as mentioned here) the rule is made.

[109]* Within the order I am speaking of,
all things, according to their kind, will veer
towards their origin, some near, some far.

[112] Therefore, across the ocean of “to be”,
all natures move towards their different ports,
each moved by import of a given drive.

[115] One instinct bears the fire towards the moon.
Another moves all death-bound creatures on.
Another grips and unifies the earth.

[118] Nor is it only such created things,
beyond intelligence, that this bow sends,
but also those possessed of love and mind.

[121]* The providence that integrates the whole
makes limpid with its light that heavenly sphere
within which rolls the sphere of greatest speed.

[124] It bears us now to our appointed place –
that bowstring with its power to aim aright
whatever it lets fly to happy targets.

[127] It’s true, though, just as, often, form will fail
to be attuned to what the art intends,
since matter, being deaf, will not respond,

[130] so, too, a creature which can freely bend
will, sometimes, though impelled entirely straight,
desert that course and wander off elsewhere.

[133] As lightning flashes fall from thunder clouds,
so likewise that first impetus strikes down,
wrenched wrong by false delight, towards earth.

[136] You ought not, if I’m right, be more amazed
at rising up than when you see a stream
descending from a hill’s crest to its base.

[139] The wonder would, in your case be, when free
of all impediment, you sat down there –
as though live flames on earth were ever still.’

[142] With this, she turned once more to face the sky

Canto 2

[1] O voi che siete in piccioletta barca,
desiderosi d'ascoltar, seguiti
dietro al mio legno che cantando varca,

[4] tornate a riveder li vostri liti:
non vi mettete in pelago, ch   forse,
perdendo me, rimarreste smarriti.

[7] L'acqua ch'io prendo gi   mai non si corse;
Minerva spira, e conducemi Appollo,
e nove Muse mi dimostran l'Orse.

[10] Voialtri pochi che drizzaste il collo
per tempo al pan de li angeli, del quale
vivesi qui ma non sen vien satollo,

[13] metter potete ben per l'alto sale
vostro navigio, servando mio solco
dinanzi a l'acqua che ritorna eguale.

[16] Que' gloriosi che passaro al Colco
non s'ammiraron come voi farete,
quando Iason vider fatto bifolco.

[19] La concreta e perpetua sete
del deiforme regno cen portava
veloci quasi come 'l ciel vedete.

[22] Beatrice in suso, e io in lei guardava;
e forse in tanto in quanto un quadrel posa
e vola e da la noce si dischiava,

[25] giunto mi vidi ove mirabil cosa
mi torse il viso a s  ; e per   quella
cui non potea mia cura essere ascosa,

[28] volta ver' me, s   lieta come bella,
'Drizza la mente in Dio grata,' mi disse,
'che n'ha congiunti con la prima Stella.'

[31] Parev' a me che nube ne coprisse

lucida, spessa, solida e pulita,
quasi adamante che lo sol ferisse.

[34] Per entro sé l'eterna margarita
ne ricevette, com' acqua recepe
raggio di luce permanendo unita.

[37] S'io era corpo, e qui non si concepe
com' una dimensione altra patio,
ch'esser convien se corpo in corpo repe,

[40] accender ne dovria più il disio
di veder quella essenza in che si vede
come nostra natura e Dio s'unio.

[43] Lì si vedrà ciò che tenem per fede,
non dimostrato, ma fia per sé noto
a guisa del ver primo che l'uom crede.

[46] Io rispuosi: 'Madonna, sì devoto
com' esser posso più, ringrazio lui
lo qual dal mortal mondo m'ha remoto.

[49] Ma ditemi: che son li segni bui
di questo corpo, che là giuso in terra
fan di Cain favoleggiare altrui?'

[52] Ella sorrise alquanto, e poi 'S'elli erra
l'opinion,' mi disse, 'd'i 'mortali
dove chiave di senso non diserra,

[55] certo non ti dovrien punger li strali
d'ammirazione omai, poi dietro ai sensi
vedi che là ragione ha corte l'ali.

[58] Ma dimmi quel che tu da te ne pensi.'
E io: 'Ciò che n'appar qua sù diverso
credo che fanno i corpi rari e densi.'

[61] Ed ella: 'Certo assai vedrai sommerso
nel falso il creder tuo, se bene ascolti
l'argomentar ch'io li farò avverso.

[64] La spera ottava vi dimostra molti
lumi, li quali e nel quale e nel quanto
notar si posson di diversi volti.

[67] Se raro e denso ciò facesser tanto,
una sola virtù sarebbe in tutti,

più e men distributa e altrettanto.

[70] Virtù diverse esser convegnon frutti
di princìpi formali, e quei, for ch'uno,
seguiterieno a tua ragion distrutti.

[73] Ancor, se raro fosse di quel bruno
cagion che tu dimandi, o d'oltre in parte
fora di sua materia si digiuno

[76] esto pianeto, o, sì come comparte
lo grasso e 'l magro un corpo, così questo
nel suo volume cangerebbe carte.

[79] Se 'l primo fosse, fora manifesto
ne l'eclissi del sol, per trasparere
lo lume come in altro raro ingesto.

[82] Questo non è: però è da vedere
de l'altro; e s'elli avvien ch'io l'altro cassi,
falsificato fia lo tuo parere.

[85] S'elli è che questo raro non trapassi,
esser conviene un termine da onde
lo suo contrario più passar non lassi;

[88] e indi l'altrui raggio si rifonde
così come color torna per vetro
lo qual di retro a se piombo nasconde.

[91] Or dirai tu ch'el si dimostra tetro
ivi lo raggio più che in altre parti,
per esser lì refratto più a retro.

[94] Da questa istanza può deliberarti
esperienza, se già mai la provi,
ch'esser suol fonte ai rivi di vostr' arti.

[97] Tre specchi prenderai; e i due rimovi
da te d'un modo, e l'altro, più rimosso,
tr'ambo li primi li occhi tuoi ritrovi.

[100] Rivolto ad essi, fa che dopo il dosso
ti stea un lume che i tre specchi accenda
e torni a te da tutti ripercosso.

[103] Ben che nel quanto tanto non si stenda
la vista più lontana, lì vedrai
come convien ch'igualmente risplenda.

[106] Or, come ai colpi de li caldi rai
de la neve riman nudo il soggetto
e dal colore e dal freddo primai,

[109] così rimaso te ne l'intelletto
voglio informar di luce sì vivace,
che ti tremolerà nel suo aspetto.

[112] Dentro dal ciel de là divina pace
si gira un corpo ne la cui virtute
l'esser di tutto suo contento giace.

[115] Lo ciel seguente, c'ha tante vedute,
quell' esser parte per diverse essenze,
da lui distratte e da lui contenute.

[118] Li altri giron per varie differenze
le distinzion che dentro da sé hanno
dispongono a lor fini e lor semenze.

[121] Questi organi del mondo così vanno,
come tu vedi omai, di grado in grado,
che di sù prendono e di sotto fanno.

[124] Riguarda bene omai sì com' io vado
per questo loco al vero che disiri,
sì che poi sappi sol tener lo guado.

[127] Lo moto e la virtù d'i santi giri,
come dal fabbro l'arte del martello,
da' beati motor convien che spiri;

[130] e'l ciel cui tanti lumi fanno bello,
de la mente profonda che lui volve
prende l'image e fassene suggello.

[133] E come l'alma dentro a vostra polve
per differenti membra e conformate
a diverse potenze si risolve,

[136] così l'intelligenza sua bontate
moltiplicata per le stelle spiega,
girando sé sovra sua unitate.

[139] Virtù diversa fa diversa lega
col prezioso corpo ch'ella avviva,
nel qual, sì come vita in voi, si lega.

[142] Per la natura lieta onde deriva,

la virtù mista per lo corpo luce
come letizia per pupilla viva.

[145] Da essa vien ciò che da luce a luce
par differente, non da denso e raro;
essa è formal principio che produce,

[148] conforme a sua bontà, lo turbo e 'l chiaro.'

CANTO 2

[1] You in that little boat who, listening hard,
have followed, from desire to hear me through,
behind my bowsprit singing on its way,

[4] now turn, look back and mark your native shores.
Do not set out upon these open seas
lest losing me you end confused and lost.

[7]*The waves I ride have never yet been crossed.
Minerva breathes. Apollo leads me on.
The nine bright Muses point the Ursa-stars.

[10] You other few who have already stretched,
straight-necked, through time to reach for angel-bread
(the food we live by here, unsatisfied)

[13] may to good purpose set your vessel out
across the deep salt swell, and plough my wake
before the waters level once again.

[16]*The Argonauts, in glory, Colchis-bound,
were not so wonder-struck as you will be
when they saw Jason yoking up his plough.

[19] In-born in being, our perpetual thirst
to reach the deiform domain now bore us on
as rapid, almost, as the spheres you see.

[22] Beatrice looked up. I looked at her.
Then maybe in the time an arrow takes
to hit the target, fly and slip the notch,

[25] I saw I'd come where something marvellous
tugged me in sight towards itself. So she
(no thought of mine could be concealed from her)

[28] turning to me, as happy as lovely,
'Direct your mind in thanks,' she said, 'to God.
For he has made us one with this first star.'

[31] To me it seemed a cloud now covered us,
shining and solid, dense and burnished clean,
almost as diamond when the sunlight strikes.

[34] Into itself the eternal margarite

took us as water will receive a ray
of light, remaining, even so, all one.

[37] If I was there in body (we can't grasp
how one dimension takes another in,
as – body snaked in body – needs must be)

[40] that should ignite in us still more desire
to see that being where, as can be seen,
our human nature is at one with God.

[43] There we shall see what here we hold in faith,
not argued through but known for what it is,
as is the primal truth that all believe.

[46] 'My lady, as devoutly as I can,
I offer Him all thanks,' I now replied,
'since He here parts me from the mortal world.

[49]* But tell me what those dark signs are that mark
the body of the moon? Down there on earth
some folk are led by these to speak of Cain.'

[52] She smiled at this a little. Then she said:
'If mortals make mistakes in what they think
when sense won't turn the key of evidence,

[55] no dart of wonder ought to pierce you through
when you observe, as now, that rational thought –
which has to follow sense – is weak of wing.

[58] But tell me what your thoughts about this are.'
'That variance,' I said, 'so I believe,
results from matter being rare or dense.'

[61] 'Well,' she replied, 'you'll shortly come to see
how deeply out of true your thinking is.
If you'll attend, I'll put the counter case.

[64] The constellations, wheeling, show you many
lights. And these, as one may easily discern,
Present as different, both in size and kind.

[67] If that were merely caused by "rare" and "dense"
there'd be in all one single power of life,
distributed at par or more or less.

[70] But virtues, differing, have to be the fruits
of different formal principles. And these,

if you were right, would all, save one, be lost.

[73]* Consider, too: if rarity explained
the dark that you have asked about, either
in part this planet would be starved of stuff,

[76] or else, as fat and lean are layered in meat,
so this, throughout its volume and extent,
would change as pages do within a book.

[79] Suppose the first were true, then this would show
in all eclipses of the sun – as light
shines through, behaving as it does in rarities.

[82] It doesn't. So let's take your second thought.
And if, maybe, I also prove this void,
then this will give the lie to all you've said.

[85] If rarity does not extend throughout,
it must at some point terminate as, there,
its opposite prevents its onward path.

[88] The second ray returning from that depth
reflects like coloured images in glass –
when glass has lead-plate hidden at its back.

[91] But now, you'll tell me, solar rays shed gloom
because in certain parts, at these set points,
the light, returning, breaks from further back.

[94]* Now if you'll try experiment – from which
the rivers of your knowledge flow –
from that objection you will free yourself.

[97] Take three reflective surfaces. Move two
an equal distance off, the other more,
and set your eye between the former two.

[100] Now facing them, arrange, behind your back,
a source of light to kindle all these three
so that it comes struck back to you from each.

[103] Although the image in the further glass
is less extensive, you are bound to see
it shines back equal in intensity.

[106] When warming sun rays strike a mass of snow,
aqueous valencies will then remain
naked of colour and their former chill.

[109] Since you in intellect are like that now,
I want to form in you a light so live,
its shimmering look will tremble to your sight.

[112] Circling within the sphere of holy peace,
an astral body turns whose power sustains
the virtual life of all that it contains.

[115] The next sphere (where so many stars are seen)
shares out such being into different modes,
each one distinct from, and contained in, that.

[118]* The seven spheres below in different ways
dispose the essences each has within
towards their proper *telos*, seed and aim.

[121] These living organs of the world thus go,
as you can see them now, from grade to grade,
receiving from above, forming below.

[124] Look closely at the steps I'll take from here
to reach the truth that you so much desire,
so you'll know how to cross this on your own.

[127]* Motion and virtue in these holy gyres
rightly draw breath (as hammer-skill from smith),
in turns deriving from angelic moves.

[130] The sphere of stars, so fine with all its lights,
receives from that deep mind which rolls it round
the image that it has, then prints that seal.

[133] And as your soul within the dust you are
diffuses and resolves through different limbs,
adapting thus to various powers of life,

[136] so too angelic intellect unfolds
(while turning still round its own unity)
its goodness multiplied through all the stars.

[139] So different virtue forms a different bond
with all those precious bodies that it brings
to life – as life in you its strength is bound.

[141] Deriving as it does from happy kind,
the virtue, fused with body, shines throughout,
as joy does in the pupil of the eye.

[145] From *this* there comes – and not from rare or dense –

apparent differences from light to light.
That is the formal principle that makes
[148] (according to its goodness) clear and cloud.'

Canto 3

[1] Quel sol che pria d'amor mi scaldò 'l petto,
di bella verità m'avea scoperto,
Provando e riprovando, il dolce aspetto;

[4] e io, per confessar corretto e certo
me stesso, tanto quanto si convenne
leva' il capo a proferer più erto;

[7] ma visione apparve che ritenne
a sé me tanto stretto, per vedersi,
che di mia confession non mi sovvenne.

[10] Quali per vetri trasparenti e tersi,
o ver per acque nitide e tranquille,
non sì profonde che i fondi sien persi,

[13] tornan d'i nostri visi le postille
debili sì, che perla in bianca fronte
non vien men forte a le nostre pupille;

[16] tali vid' io più facce a parlar pronte;
per ch'io dentro a l'error contrario corsi
a quel ch'accese amor tra l'omo e 'l fonte.

[19] Sùbito sì com' io di lor m'accorsi,
quelle stimando specchiati sembianti,
Per veder di cui fosser, li occhi torsi;

[22] e nulla vidi, e ritorsi li avanti
dritti nel lume de la dolce guida,
che, sorridendo, ardea ne li occhi santi.

[25] 'Non ti maravigliar perch' io sorrida,'
mi disse, 'appresso il tuo pueril coto,
poi sopra 'l vero ancor lo piè non fida,

[28] ma te rivolge, come suole, a vòto:
vere sustanze son ciò che tu vedi,
qui rilegate per manco di voto.

[31] Però parla con esse e odi e credi;

ché la verace luce che le appaga
da sé non lascia lor torcer li piedi.’

[34] E io a l’ombra che pareva più vaga
di ragionar, drizza’ mi, e cominciai,
quasi com’ uom cui troppa voglia smaga:

[37] ‘O ben creato spirito, che a’ rai
di vita eterna la dolcezza senti
che, non gustata, non s’intende mai,

[40] grazioso mi fia se mi contenti
del nome tuo e de la vostra sorte.’

Ond’ ella, pronta e con occhi ridenti:

[43] ‘La nostra carità non serra porte
a giusta voglia, se non come quella
che vuol simile a sé tutta sua corte.

[46] I’ fui nel mondo vergine sorella;
e se la mente tua ben s’riguarda,
non mi ti celerà l’esser più bella,

[49] ma riconoscerai ch’i’ son Piccarda,
che, posta qui con questi altri beati,
beata sono in la spera più tarda.

[52] Li nostri affetti, che solo infiammati
son nel piacer de lo Spirito Santo,
letizian del suo ordine formati.

[55] E questa sorte che par giù cotanto,
però n’è data, perchè fuor negletti
li nostri voti, e vòti in alcun canto.’

[58] Ond’ io a lei: ‘Ne’ mirabili aspetti
vostri risplende non so che divino
che vi trasmuta da’ primi concetti:

[61] però non fui a rimembrar festino;
ma or m’aiuta ciò che tu mi dici,
sì che raffigurar m’è più latino.

[64] Ma dimmi: voi che siete qui felici,
disiderate voi più alto loco
per più vedere e per più farvi amici?’

[67] Con quelle altr’ ombre pria sorrise un poco;
da indi mi rispuose tanto lieta,

ch'arder pareva d'amor nel primo foco:

[70] 'Frate, la nostra volontà quieta
virtù di carità, che fa volerne
sol quel ch'avemo, e d'altro non ci asseta.

[73] Se disiassimo esser più superne,
foran discordi li nostri disiri
dal voler di colui che qui ne cerne;

[76] che vedrai non capere in questi giri,
s'essere in carità è qui *necesse*,
e se la sua natura ben rimiri.

[79] Anzi è formale ad esto beato *esse*
tenersi dentro a la divina voglia,
per ch'una fansi nostre voglie stesse;

[82] sì che, come noi sem di soglia in soglia
per questo regno, a tutto il regno piace
com' a lo re che 'n suo voler ne 'nvoglia.

[85] E 'n la sua voluntade è nostra pace:
ell' è quel mare al qual tutto si move
ciò ch'ella cria o che natura face.'

[88] Chiaro mi fu allor come ogne dove
in cielo e paradiso, *etsi* la grazia
del sommo ben d'un modo non vi piove.

[91] Ma sì com' elli avvien, s'un cibo sazia
e d'un altro rimane ancor la gola,
che quel sì chere e di quel si ringrazia,

[94] cosi fee' io con atto e con parola,
per apprender da lei qual fu la tela
onde non trasse infino a co la spuola.

[97] 'Perfetta vita e alto merto inciela
donna più su,' mi disse, 'a la cui norma
nel vostro mondo giii si veste e vela,

[100] perchè fino al morir si vegghi e dorma
con quello sposo ch'ogne voto accetta
che caritate a suo piacer conforma.

[103] Dal mondo, per seguirla, giovinetta
fuggi'mi, e nel suo abito mi chiusi
e promisi la via de la sua setta.

[106] Uomini poi, a mal più ch'a bene usi,
fuor mi rapiron de la dolce chiostra:
Iddio si sa qual poi mia vita fusi.

[109] E quest' altro splendor che ti si mostra
da la mia destra parte e che s'accende
di tutto il lume de la spera nostra,

[112] ciò ch'io dico di me, di sé intende;
sorella fu, e così le fu tolta
di capo l'ombra de le sacre bende.

[115] Ma poi che pur al mondo fu rivolta
contra suo grado e contra buona usanza,
non fu dal vel del cor già mai disciolta.

[118] Quest' è la luce de la gran Costanza
che del secondo vento di Soave
generò 'l terzo e l'ultima possanza.'

[121] Così parlommi, e poi cominciò 'Ave,
Maria' cantando, e cantando vanio
come per acqua cupa cosa grave.

[124] La vista mia, che tanto lei seguio
quanto possibil fu, poi che la perse,
volse al segno di maggior disio,

[127] e a Beatrice tutta si converse;
ma quella folgorò nel mïo sguardo
sì che da prima il viso non sofferse;

[130] e ciò mi fece a dimandar più tardo.

CANTO 3

[1] She – as the sun who first in love shone warm
into my heart – had now, by proof and counterproof,
disclosed to me the lovely face of truth.

[4] And being ready, as was only right,
to own my errors – and new certainties –
I flung my head back, and I meant to speak.

[7] But then, it seemed, a vision came to me
and bound me up so tightly to itself
that these confessions would not come to mind.

[10] Compare: from clear and polished panes of glass,
or else from glinting waters, calm and still
(but not so deep their depths are lost in darkness),

[13] we see reflections that reveal a hint,
though faint, of our own looks, and reach the eye
less strongly than a pearl on some white brow.

[16]*So I saw many faces, keen to speak,
and ran now to the opposite mistake
from that which fired the love of man and stream.

[19] No sooner had I noticed – and supposed
that these were seemings in a looking-glass –
I turned my eyes to see who these might be.

[22] I saw there nothing, so returned my glance
straight to the shining-out of my dear guide,
who, smiling at me, blazed in her own look.

[25] ‘You baby!’ she said. ‘Don’t worry or wonder,
to see me smile at all these ponderings.
Those feet are not yet steady on the ground of truth.

[28] Your mind, from habit, turns round to a void.
And yet those beings that you see are true,
bound here below for vows they disavowed.

[31] So speak to them. And hear and trust their words.
The light of truth that feeds them with its peace
will never let their feet be turned awry.’

[34] Now turning to the shadow who most yearned,

in love and pure delight, to speak to me,
I said, nearly entranced by eagerness:

[37] ‘You spirit, well created in the rays
of this eternity of life, you feel
sweetness never known, if not by taste.

[40] Let me, then, in your kindness, hear your name,
and tell me what your destiny has been.

To which – eyes smiling – she at once replied:

[43] ‘We, living in God’s love, can no more lock
our doors against true-minded aims of will
than God’s love does, which wills this court like him.

[46] I was a virgin sister in the world.
Search deep in memory. My being now
more beautiful won’t hide me from your eyes.

[49] I am Piccarda – as you’ll know I am –
and blessed among the many who are blessed,
within this slowest moving of the spheres.

[52] The flames of what we feel are lit in us
by pleasure purely in the Holy Spirit,
dancing for happiness in that design.

[55] And though the part allotted us may seem
far down, the reason is that, yes, we did
neglect our vows. These were in some part void.’

[58] ‘A wonder shining in the look you have
reveals,’ I said, ‘an I-don’t-know of holiness
that alters you from how you once were seen.

[61] So recognition did not speed to mind.
Yet all you say has helped me understand.
Your image speaks precisely to me now.

[64] But tell me this: you are so happy here,
have you no wish to gain some higher grade,
to see and be as friends to God still more?’

[67] Smiling a moment with the other shades,
she then, in utmost happiness, replied,
blazing, it seemed, in the first fires of love:

[70] ‘Dear brother, we in will are brought to rest
by power of *caritas* that makes us will

no more than what we have, nor thirst for more.

[73] Were our desire to be more highly placed,
all our desires would then be out of tune
with His, who knows and wills where we should be.

[76] Yet discord in these spheres cannot occur –
as you, if you reflect on this, will see –
since charity is *a priori* here.

[79] In formal terms, our being in beatitude
entails in-holding to the will of God,
our own wills thus made one with the divine.

[82] In us, therefore, there is, throughout this realm,
a placing, rung to rung, delighting all
– our king as well in-willing us in will.

[85]*In His volition is the peace we have.
That is the sea to which all being moves,
be it what that creates or Nature blends.’

[88] Now it was clear. I saw that everywhere
in Paradise there’s Heaven, though grace may rain
in varied measure from the Highest Good.

[91] But then, as often happens over food
(though satisfied with one, we crave the next,
reaching for that while still we’re saying ‘thanks’),

[94] so now in word and gesture I betrayed
an eagerness to hear from her what weave
her spool had not yet drawn out to the end.

[97]*‘Perfect in life, her merits raised on high,
there is a lady – more in-heavened than we –
who wrote, on earth, a Rule of dress and veil,

[100] that lets its wearer sleep and wake till death
beside a husband who accepts those vows
that charity conforms to his delight.

[103] To follow her, I fled – a girl, no more –
out of the world. I pulled her cowl to me,
and promised my obedience to that Rule.

[106] Men now arrived, more set on harm than good.
They dragged me from the cloister I had loved,
and God well knows what then my life became.

[109] But, over to my right, there shows to you
another splendour who, enkindled now
with all the light that gathers in our sphere,

[112] knows from her own life what I say of mine.
She was our sister. And from her head, too,
as torn the shadow of her pure, white hood.

[115]*This is the light of Constance, that high queen
who bore to Swabia's second storm a son,
the third – and ultimate – of that great line.

[118] And yet – although against her will, against
all decency – she went back to the world,
she never let the veil fall from her heart.

[121] Those were her words to me. But then 'Ave
Maria' began, singing. And, singing,
she went from sight, as weight sinks deep in water.

[124] My eyes pursued as far as eyesight can,
but, as I lost her, so I turned once more
to target a desire far greater still.

[127] Now all my thoughts were fixed on Beatrice.
But she, as lightning strikes, so stunned my gaze,
my eyes at first could not support the sight,

[130] and this was why my question came so slow.

Canto 4

[1] Intra due cibi, distanti e moventi
d'un modo, prima si morria di fame,
che liber' omo l'un recasse ai denti;

[4] sì si starebbe un agno intra due brame
di fieri lupi, igualmente temendo;
sì si starebbe un cane intra due dame:

[7] per che, s'i' mi tacea, me non riprendo,
da li miei dubbi d'un modo sospinto,
poi ch'era necessario, nè commendo.

[10] Io mi tacea, ma 'l mio disir dipinto
m'era nel viso, e 'l dimandar con ello,
più caldo assai che per parlar distinto.

[13] Fé sì Beatrice qual fé Daniello,
Nabuccodonosor levando d'ira,
che l'avea fatto ingiustamente fello;

[16] e disse: 'Io veggio ben come ti tira
uno e altro disio, sì che tua cura
sé stessa lega sì che fuor non spira.

[19] Tu argomenti: "Se 'l buon voler dura,
la violenza altrui per qual ragione
di meritar mi scema la misura?"

[22] Ancor di dubitar ti dà cagione
parer tornarsi l'anime a le stelle,
secondo la sentenza di Platone.

[25] Queste son le question che nel tuo *velle*
pontano igualmente; e però pria
tratterò quella che più ha di felle.

[28] D'i Serafin colui che più s'india,
Moisè, Samuel, e quel Giovanni
che prender vuoi, io dico, non Maria,

[31] non hanno in altro cielo i loro scanni

che questi spirti che mo t'appariro,
né hanno a l'esser lor più o meno anni;

[34] ma tutti fanno bello il primo giro,
e differentemente han dolce vita
per sentir più e men l'eterno spiro.

[37] Qui si mostraro, non perché sortita
sia questa spera lor, ma per far segno
de la celestial c'ha men salita.

[40] Così parlar conviensi al vostro ingegno,
però che solo da sensato apprende
ciò che fa poscia d'intelletto degno.

[43] Per questo la Scrittura condescende
a vostra facultate, a piedi e mano
attribuisce a Dio e altro intende;

[46] e Santa Chiesa con aspetto umano
Gabriel e Michel vi rappresenta,
e l'altro che Tobia rifece sano.

[49] Quel che Timeo de l'anime argomenta
non è simile a ciò che qui si vede,
però che, come dice, par che senta.

[52] Dice che l'alma a la sua Stella riede,
credendo quella quindi esser decisa
quando natura per forma la diede;

[55] e forse sua sentenza è d'altra guisa
che la voce non suona, ed esser puote
con intenzion da non esser derisa.

[58] S'elli intende tornare a queste ruote
l'onor de la influenza e 'l biasmo, forse
in alcun vero suo arco percuote.

[61] Questo principio, male inteso, torse
già tutto il mondo quasi, sì che Giove,
Mercurio e Marte a nominar trascorse.

[64] L'altra dubitazion che ti commove
ha men velen, però che sua malizia
non ti poria menar da me altrove.

[67] Parere ingiusta la nostra giustizia
ne li occhi d'i mortali, è argomento

di fede e non d'eretica nequizia.

[70] Ma perché puote vostro accorgimento
ben penetrare a questa veritate,
come disiri, ti farò contento.

[73] Se violenza è quando quel che pate
niente conferisce a quel che sforza,
non fuor quest' alme per essa scusate:

[76] chè volontà, se non vuol, non s'ammorza,
ma fa come natura face in foco,
se mille volte violenza il torza.

[79] Per che, s'ella si piega assai o poco,
segue la forza; e così queste fero
possendo rifuggir nel santo loco.

[82] Se fosse stato lor volere intero,
come tenne Lorenzo in su la grada,
e fece Muzio a la sua man severo,

[85] così l'avria ripinte per la strada
ond' eran tratte, come fuoro sciolte;
ma così salda voglia è troppo rada.

[88] E per queste parole, se ricolte
l'hai come dei, è l'argomento casso
che t'avria fatto noia ancor più volte.

[91] Ma or ti s'attraversa un altro passo
dinanzi a li occhi, tal che per te stesso
non usciresti: pria saresti lasso.

[94] Io t'ho per certo ne la mente messo
ch'alma beata non poria mentire,
però ch'è sempre al primo vero appresso;

[97] e poi potesti da Piccarda udire
che l'affezion del vel Costanza tenne;
sì ch'ella par qui meco contraddire.

[100] Molte fiate già, frate, addivenne
che, per fuggir periglio, contra grato
si fé di quel che far non si convenne;

[103] come Almeone, che, di ciò pregato
dal padre suo, la propria madre spense,
per non perder pietà si fè spietato.

[106] A questo punto voglio che tu pense
che la forza al voler si mischia, e fanno
sì che scusar non si posson l'offense.

[109] Voglia assoluta non consente al danno;
ma consentevi in tanto in quanto teme,
se si ritrae, cadere in più affanno.

[112] Però, quando Piccarda quello spreme,
de la voglia assoluta intende, e io
de l'altra; sì che ver diciamo insieme.'

[115] Cotal fu l'ondeggiar del santo rio
ch'uscì del fonte ond'ogne ver deriva;
tal puose in pace uno e altro disio.

[118] 'O amanza del primo amante, o diva,'
diss'io appresso, 'il cui parlar m'inonda
e scalda sì, che più e più m'avviva,

[121] non è l'affezion mia tanto profonda,
che basti a render voi grazia per grazia;
ma quei che vede e puote a ciò risponda.

[124] Io veggio ben che già mai non si sazia
nostro intelletto, se 'l ver non lo illustra
di fuor dal qual nessun vero si spazia.

[127] Posasi in esso, come fera in lustra,
tosto che giunto l'ha; e giugner puollo:
se non, ciascun disio sarebbe *frustra*.

[130] Nasce per quello, a guisa di rampollo,
a piè del vero il dubbio; ed è natura
ch'al sommo pinga noi di collo in collo.

[133] Questo m'invita, questo m'assicura
con reverenza, donna, a dimandarvi
d'un'altra verita che m'è oscura.

[136] Io vo' saper se l'uom può sodisfarvi
ai voti manchi sì con altri beni,
ch'a la vostra statera non sien parvi.'

[139] Beatrice mi guardò con li occhi pieni
di faville d'amor così divini,
che, vinta, mia virtute diè le reni,

[142] e quasi mi perdei con li occhi chini.

CANTO 4

[1]* Between two equidistant portions, equally moving, if free to choose, you'd starve to death before you'd carried either to your teeth.

[4] So, too, some lamb might stand between the bite of hungry wolves, fearing them both alike.

So, too, a hound would stand between two does.

[7] If, therefore, I kept silence now, I neither criticize nor praise myself. Driven by doubts of equal measure, this was necessity.

[10] I still kept silent. Yet my keen desire was painted – and my questions, too – within my eyes, warmer by far than well-formed words could speak.

[13]* So Beatrice did as Daniel did to free Nebuchadnezzar from the rage that made him cruel beyond all rational need.

[16] 'I clearly see,' she said, 'how two desires fret you as you take aim. Your own concerns constrain themselves. You cannot breathe them out.

[19] Your thinking runs: "If will-to-good endures, how, then, can violence wrought by other hands reduce in me the measure of desert?"

[22]* A further reason for your doubt is this: our souls return, or so it may appear, as Plato in his teaching says, to stars.

[25] These are the questions that, with equal weight, point, in volition, hard upon your mind. I'll first treat that which is more poisonous.

[28]* The most in-god-ed of the Seraphim, Moses and Samuel – and either John you care to mention – even Maria,

[31] none is enthroned in any other sphere than those souls are who've just appeared to you. Nor are their years, existing, more or less.

[34] All add in beauty to the highest gyre.

Some sense the eternal breathing more, some less.
So life is sweet to all in differing ways.

[37] They did, here, show themselves, but not because
this sphere has been allotted them as theirs.

They signify celestial power least raised.

[40] To speak in this way fits the human mind.
For you can only grasp through things you've sensed
what mind will then present as fit for thought.

[43] For this same reason, Scripture condescends
to your capacities, and says that God
has hands and feet – though meaning otherwise.

[46]* So, Holy Church will also represent
Michael and Gabriel with human face,
the other, too, who helped heal Tobit's sight.

[49] But Plato in *Timaeus* "On the soul"
argues a case at odds with that seen here.
For what he says, it seems, has literal force.

[52] He says that souls go back to their own stars,
believing them to be excised from these,
when Nature granted each its proper form.

[55] This doctrine, though, perhaps conceals a sense
quite other than these words of his pronounce,
with implications we should not deride.

[58] If Plato means that, back to join these wheels,
there comes the blame or honour of their power,
perhaps his bow shot hits upon some truth.

[61] And yet, misunderstood, this principle
wrenched almost all the world off course. So Jove
and Mars and Mercury were named as gods.

[64] The other doubt, so troubling you, is not
as venomous. The injury it does
can't lead you elsewhere and away from me.

[67] That justice in our realm, to mortal eyes,
should seem unjust concerns you in regard
to faith. It's not some vicious heresy.

[70] But since you have the subtlety of mind
yourself to penetrate the truth of this,

I shall, since you desire it, tell you all.

[73] If “violence” is done when those who’re harmed
bring nothing of their own to outside force,
these souls, though blessed, aren’t exempt from blame.

[76] Free will, unless it wills, cannot be quenched
but acts like Nature in a rising flame
even though torn by force a thousand times.

[79] But if it bends – whatever the degree –
it follows force. These women, though they could
have fled to holy ground, did bend like this.

[82]*Had they, in what they willed, stood absolute,
as did Saint Lawrence on the burning coals,
or Mucius – harsh towards his own right hand –

[85] their wills would then have thrust them, once released,
back on the road from which they’d just been drawn.
But will as firm as that is very rare.

[88] These words (suppose you’ve listened as you ought)
will leave the case regarding what is just
– which often would have irked you – null and void.

[91] Yet now, across the path before your eyes,
appears another obstacle. And you yourself –
you’d quickly tire – could not get free from this.

[94] I’ve fixed within your mind this certainty:
that souls in Paradise can never lie.
They all are, always, close to primal truth.

[97]* But then you might have heard Piccarda say
that Constance kept her heart set on the veil,
And so, it seems, she contradicts me here.

100 It has, my dearest brother, often been
that things, in fleeing danger, have been done,
counter to choice, that were not right to do,

[103]*as when, responding to his father’s prayer,
Alcmaeon slew his mother for revenge,
and, not to fail in piety, proved pitiless.

[106] I want you, in such cases, to be clear
that will conjoins with violence. And so,
for these offences there is no excuse.

[109] Will does not, in the absolute, consent to harm.
It does consent, however, in degrees of fear,
lest, drawing back, it falls to more distress.

[112] So when Piccarda makes the point she does,
she means the will as absolute while I
intend the other. We, as one, speak truth.'

[115] These waves came flooding from that holy stream
that rises at the source of every truth.

As such, they set my two desires to rest.

[118] 'Goddess, beloved of the loving First!
Your words in waves,' I said, 'flow into me.
They warm me through, and light me more and more.

[121] No feeling I possess is deep enough
to make return to you, in grace for grace.
But He who sees – and can – will answer so.

[124] I see full well that human intellect
can never be content unless that truth
beyond which no truth soars shines down on it.

[127] When once they come to it, as come they may,
minds couch in truth as beasts do in their lairs.
Were that not so, then all desire would fail.

[130] Born of that will, there rise up, like fresh shoots,
pure doubts. These flourish at the foot of truth.
From height to height, they drive us to the peak.

[133] This beckons me. This makes me very sure
that I, my lady, may in reverence seek
another truth that still is dark to me.

[136] I want to know if we can make amends
with other goods when vows go unfulfilled,
so these will not seem meagre in your scale.'

[139] Now Beatrice looked at me with eyes all full
of sparks of speaking love, and so divine
that, overwhelmed, I turned my back on her

[142] and, eyes bowed down, I almost lost myself.

Canto 5

[1] ‘S’io ti fiammeggio nel caldo d’amore
di là dal modo che ’n terra si vede,
sì che del viso tuo vinco il valore,

[4] non ti maravigliar, chè ciò procede
da perfetto veder, che, come apprende,
così nel bene appreso move il piede.

[7] Io veggio ben sì come già resplende
ne l’intelletto tuo l’eterna luce,
che, vista, sola e sempre amore accende;

[10] e s’altra cosa vostro amor seduce,
non è se non di quella alcun vestigio,
mal conosciuto, che quivi traluce.

[13] Tu vuo’ saper se con altro servizio,
per manco voto, si può render tanto
che l’anima sicuri di letigio.’

[16] Sì cominciò Beatrice questo canto;
e sì com’ uom che suo parlar non spezza,
continuò così ’l processo santo:

[19] ‘Lo maggior don che Dio per sua larghezza
fesse creando, e a la sua bontate
più conformato, e quel ch’e’ più apprezza,

[22] fu de là volontà là libertate;
di che le creature intelligenti,
e tutte e sole, fuoro e son dotate.

[25] Or ti parrà, se tu quinci argomenti,
l’alto valor del voto, s’è sì fatto
che Dio consenta quando tu consenti;

[28] chè, nel fermar tra Dio e l’omo il patto,
vittima fassi di questo tesoro,
tal quale io dico; e fassi col suo atto.

[31] Dunque che render puossi per ristoro?

Se credi bene usar quel c'hai offerto,
di maltolletto vuo' far buon lavoro.

[34] Tu se' omai del maggior punto certo;
ma perché Santa Chiesa in ciò dispensa,
che par contra lo ver ch'i' t'ho scoperto,

[37] convienti ancor sedere un poco a mensa,
però che 'l cibo rigido c'hai preso,
richiede ancora aiuto a tua dispensa.

[40] Apri la mente a quel ch'io ti paleso
e fermalvi entro; ché non fa scienza,
sanza lo ritenere, avere inteso.

[43] Due cose si convegnono a l'essenza
di questo sacrificio: l'una è quella
di che si fa; l'altr' è la convenenza.

[46] Quest' ultima già mai non si cancella
se non servata; e intorno di lei
sì preciso di sopra si favella:

[49] però necessitato fu a li Ebrei
pur l'offerere, ancor ch'alcuna offerta
sì permutasse, come saver dei.

[52] L'altra, che per materia t'è aperta,
puote ben esser tal, che non si falla
se con altra materia si converta.

[55] Ma non trasmuti carco a la sua spalla
per suo arbitrio alcun, sanza la volta
e de la chiave bianca e de la gialla;

[58] e ogne permutanza credi stolta,
se la cosa dimessa in la sorpresa
come 'l quattro nel sei non è raccolta.

[61] Però squalunque cosa tanto pesa
per suo valor che tragga ogne bilancia,
sodisfar non si può con altra spesa.

[64] Non prendan li mortali il voto a ciancia;
siate fedeli, e a ciò far non bieci,
come Ieptè a la sua prima mancia;

[67] cui più si convenia dicer "Mai fed",
che, servando, far peggio; e così stolto

ritrovar puoi il gran duca de' Greci,

[70] onde pianse Efigènia il suo bel volto,
e fé pianger di sè i folli e i savi
ch'udir parlar di così fatto còlto.

[73] Siate, Cristiani, a muovervi più gravi:
non siate come penna ad ogne vento,
e non crediate ch'ogne acqua vi lavi.

[76] Avete il novo e 'l vecchio Testamento,
e 'l pastor de la Chiesa che vi guida;
questo vi basti a vostro salvamento.

[79] Se mala cupidigia altro vi gridà,
uomini siate, e non pecore matte,
sì che 'l Giudeo di voi tra voi non rida!

[82] Non fate com' agnel che lascia il latte
de la sua madre, e semplice e lascivo
seco medesmo a suo piacer combatte!'

[85] Così Beatrice a me com' io scrivo;
poi si rivolse tutta disiante
a quella parte ove 'l mondo è più vivo.

[88] Lo suo tacere e 'l trasmutar sembiante
puoser silenzio al mio cupido ingegno,
che già nuove questioni avea davante;

[91] e sì come saetta che nel segno
percuote pria che sia là corda queta,
così correremmo nel secondo regno.

[94] Quivi la donna mia vid' io sì lieta,
come nel lume di quel ciel si mise,
che più lucente se ne fé 'l pianeta.

[97] E se la stella si cambiò e rise,
qual mi fec' io che pur da mia natura
trasmutabile son per tutte guise!

[100] Come 'n peschiera ch'è tranquilla e pura
traggoni i pesci a ciò che vien di fori
per modo che lo stimin lor pastura,

[103] sì vid' io ben più di mille splendori
trarsi ver' noi, e in ciascun s'udia:
'Ecco chi crescerà li nostri amori.'

[106] E sì come ciascuno a noi venìa,
vedeasi l'ombra piena di letizia
nel folgór chiaro che di lei uscia.

[109] Pensa, lettor, se quel che qui s'inizia
non procedesse, come tu avresti
di più sapere angosciosa carizia;

[112] e per te vederai come da questi
m'era in disio d'udir lor condizioni,
sì come a li occhi mi fur manifesti.

[115] 'O bene nato a cui veder li troni
del triunfo etternal concede grazia
Prima che la milizia s'abbandoni,

[118] del lume che per tutto il ciel si spazia
noi semo accesi; e però, se disii
di noi chiarirti, a tuo piacer ti sazia.'

[121] Così da un di quelli spirti pii
detto mi fu; e da Beatrice: 'Dì, dì
Sicuramente, e credi come a dii.'

[124] 'Io veggio ben sì come tu t'annidi
nel proprio lume, e che de li occhi il traggi,
erch' e' corusca sì come tu ridi;

[127] ma non so chi tu sé', nìperché aggi,
anima degna, il grado de la spera
che si vela a' mortai con altrui raggi.'

[130] Questo diss' io diritto a la lumera
che pria m'avea parlato; ond' ella fessi
ucente più assai di quel ch'ell' era.

[133] Sì come il sol che si cela elli stessi
per troppa luce, come 'l caldo ha róse
le temperanze d'i vapori spessi,

[136] per più letizia sì mi si nascose
dentro al suo raggio là figura santa;
e così chiusa chiusa mi rispuose

[139] nel modo che 'l seguente canto canta.

CANTO 5

[1] 'If I flame out in warmth of love to you
beyond all measure that is seen on earth,
and so defeat the prowess of your eyes,

[4] don't wonder why. This light in me proceeds
from perfect sight, which, once it apprehends
the good, will dance on, apprehending that.

[7] Already I see well in your own mind
the mirrored splendour of eternal light
which seen will kindle – only, always – love.

[10] And if your love is teased to other things,
then these are nothing but the merest trace,
ill understood, of that light shining through.

[13] You wish to know if, when a vow falls short,
some other service might be rendered up
to keep that soul secure from legal charge.'

[16] So Beatrice's song began this canto,
and then, as one who makes no break in speech,
continued in the sacred process thus:

[19] 'The greatest gift that God, in spacious deed,
made, all-creating – and most nearly formed
to His liberality, most prized by Him –

[22] was liberty in actions of the will,
with which all creatures of intelligence –
and they alone – both were and are endowed.

[25] Now there'll appear, if you pursue this thought,
the value and nobility of vows,
when framed so God's consent consents with yours.

[28] For in a pact confirmed by God and man
the treasured gift I speak of is itself
made sacrifice, made thus by its own act.

[31] And so what restitution can there be?
You think you'll make good use of what you gave?
Well, that's to try good works with stolen cash.

[34] So now you're certain of the major point.

But since our Holy Church can loose a vow –
which seems quite counter to the truth I’ve told –

[37] you’ll need to sit a while more at this feast.

The meat that you have taken on is tough.

It needs some help if you’re to get it down.

[40] Open your mind to what I’ll now declare
and grasp it inwardly. To understand
won’t count as knowledge if it’s not retained.

[43] Essential in a sacrificial vow
are two considerations: what we’ll *do*,
then, formally, the fact that we *agree*.

[46] *Per se*, agreements, save when carried through,
cannot be nullified. And that, above,
was what, precisely, was made clear to you.

[49]* The Hebrews of necessity were thus
required to make appropriate offerings,
though some, as you should know, were modified.

[52] The second aspect (‘substance’, as defined)
may properly be varied, so no blame
attaches in the change to other things.

[55] Do not, though, shift the burden from your back
by any mere decision of your own.

A priest must turn both white and yellow keys.

[58] All changes – please believe – are idiotic
unless the principle and substitute
stand in a ratio of four to six.

[61] When first vows, therefore, are of so much weight
that they, in value, twist the scales awry,
one cannot quit the charge by substitutes.

[64]* So mortals should not take facetious oaths.
Be faithful. But in being so, don’t squint –
like Jephthah, pledging his ‘good day’ to death.

[67] Better for him if he had said: ‘I’m wrong,’
than do worse doing it. Stupid as well,
the chieftain of the Greeks, as you can see.

[70] For him, in sacrifice, Iphigenia rinsed
her lovely face in tears, and caused to weep

both foolish men and wise at such observances.

[73] Christians, be weightier in moving vows.
Don't flutter on every breeze like feathers.

And don't suppose that every vow will cleanse.

[76] You have the Testaments, both Old and New,
a shepherd in the Church to be your guide.
That is enough for your salvation here.

[79] If wrongful appetites yell otherwise,
you are still human, not such brain-dead sheep
as make the Jews among you laugh aloud.

[82] Don't imitate those silly, wayward lambs
who wander from their mother's milk, and fight
only against themselves for sheer delight.'

[85] So Beatrice (as I write) to me.
And then she, all desiring, turned once more
to where the universe shines liveliest.

[88] Her saying nothing now and changing look
imposed a silence on my avid mind,
which had already new demands ahead.

[91] And so, as when some arrow hits its mark
before the string that shot it comes to rest,
we ran on swiftly to the second realm.

[94] And here, on entering that heavenly light,
I, on the instant, saw in her such joy
the star itself at that shone brighter still.

[97] And if the planet changed its form and laughed,
then what of me, being, as mortals are,
so prone in every way to transmutation.

[100] Compare: in fish pools that are still and clear,
the fish are drawn – as though they guess at food –
to anything that comes there from outside.

[103] So now I saw a thousand splendours plus
drawing towards us. And in each was heard:
'Look there! He'll make our many loves grow more.'

[106] And then, as each came near to us, each shade
was seen – within the flash of clarity
that came from each – full of pure happiness.

[109] Readers, just think if what we've now begun
did not go on, what torment it would be
to hunger, wanting further information.

[112] Imagine that, and then you, too, will see
my great desire, when these came to my eyes,
to hear from them what their conditions were.

[115] 'O you, born well! To you is granted grace
to see the thrones of triumph in eternity
before your soldiership on earth is done.

[118] The ray that soars through all these heavenly skies
sets us ablaze. And so, if you desire
clear words concerning us, please take your fill.'

[121] These words were uttered by one holy soul.
From Beatrice: 'Speak! Just get it said.
Be confident. Believe them as though gods.'

[124] 'You make your nest, as I can see, within
a light that, drawn from your own eyes,
is yours alone. It glitters as you smile.

[127] But still I do not know, you honoured soul,
who you all are, why ranked in Mercury,
the sphere that sun rays veil from mortal eyes.'

[130] I spoke directly to that source of light,
the first to speak to me. And this itself now shone
with far more brilliance than it did before.

[133] Compare: the sun, when heat has worn away
the tempering influence of a vapour cloud,
conceals itself in overwhelming light.

[136] So now, in greater joy, that holy form
hid himself from me in his own bright ray
and, thus enclosed, enclosed he spoke to me

[139] to chant the chant the following canto sings.

Canto 6

[1] 'Poscia che Costantin l'aquila volse
contr' al corso del ciel, ch'ella seguio
dietro a l'antico che Lavina tolse,

[4] cento e cent' anni e più l'uccel di Dio
ne lo stremo d'Europa si ritenne,
vicino a' monti de' quai prima uscìo;

[7] e sotto l'ombra de le sacre penne
governò 'l mondo li di mano in mano,
e sì cangiando, in su la mia pervenne.

[10] Cesare fui e son Iustiniano,
che, per voler del primo amor ch'i' sento,
d'entro le leggi trassi il troppo e 'l vano.

[13] E prima ch'io a l'ovra fossi attento,
una natura in Cristo esser, non piùè,
credea, e di tal fede era contento;

[16] ma 'l benedetto Agapito, che fue
sommo pastore, a la fede sincera
mi dirizzò con le parole sue.

[19] Io li credetti; e ciò che 'n sua fede era,
vegg' io or chiaro sì, come tu vedi
ogni contradizione e falsa e vera.

[22] Tosto che con la Chiesa mossi i piedi,
a Dio per grazia piacque di spirarmi
l'alto lavoro, e tutto 'n lui mi diedi;

[25] e al mio Belisar commendai l'armi,
cui la destra del ciel fu sì congiunta,
che segno fu ch'i' dovessi posarmi.

[28] Or qui a la question prima s'appunta
la mia risposta; ma sua condizione
mi stringe a seguitare alcuna giunta,

[31] perchè tu veggi con quanta ragione

si move contr' al sacrosanto segno
e chi 'l s'appropria e chi a lui s'opponne.

[34] Vedi quanta virtù l'ha fatto degno
di reverenza; e cominciò da l'ora
che Pallante morì per darli regno.

[37] Tu sai ch'el fece in Alba sua dimora
per trecento anni e oltre, infino al fine
che i tre a' tre pugnar per lui ancora.

[40] E sai ch'el fé dal mal de le Sabine
al dolor di Lucrezia in sette regi,
vincendo intorno le genti vicine.

[43] Sai quel ch'el fé portato da li egregi
Romani incontro a Brenno, incontro a Pirro,
incontro a li altri principi e collegi;

[46] onde Torquato e Quinzio, che dal cirro
negletto fu nomato, i Deci e' Fabi
ebber la fama che volontier mirro.

[49] Eppo atterrò l'orgoglio de li Aràbi
che di retro ad Anibale passaro
l'alpestre rocce, Po, di che tu labi.

[52] Sott' esso giovanetti triumfaro
Scipione e Pompeo; e a quel colle
sotto 'l qual tu nascesti parve amaro.

[55] Poi, presso al tempo che tutto 'l ciel voile
reduer lo mondo a suo modo sereno,
Cesare per voler di Roma il tolle.

[58] E quel che fé da Varo infino a Reno,
Isara vide ed Era e vide Senna
e ogni valle onde Rodano è pieno.

[61] Quel che fé poi ch'elli uscì di Ravenna
e saltò Rubicon, fu di tal volo,
che nol seguiteria lingua né penna.

[64] Inver' la Spagna rivolse lo stuolo,
poi ver' Durazzo, e Farsalia percosse
sì ch'al Nil caldo si sentì del duolo.

[67] Antandro e Simeonta, onde si mosse,
rivide e là dov' Ettore si cuba;

e mal per Tolomeo poscia si scosse.

[70] Da indi scese folgorando a Iuba;
onde si volse nel vostro occidente,
ove sentia la pompeana tuba.

[73] Di quel che fé col baiulo seguente,
Bruto con Cassio ne l'inferno latra,
e Modena e Perugia fu dolente.

[76] Piangene ancor la trista Cleopatra,
che, fuggendoli innanzi, dal colubro
la morte prese subitana e atra.

[79] Con costui corse infino al lito rubro;
con costui puose il mondo in tanta pace,
che fu serrato a Giano il suo delubro.

[82] Ma ciò che 'l segno che parlar mi face
fatto avea prima e poi era fatturo
per lo regno mortal ch'a lui soggiace,

[85] diventa in apparenza poco e scuro,
se in mano al terzo Cesare si mira
con occhio chiaro e con affetto puro;

[88] ché la viva giustizia che mi spira,
li concedette, in mano a quel ch'i' dico,
gloria di far vendetta a la sua ira.

[91] Or qui t'ammira in ciò ch'io ti replico:
poscia con Tito a far vendetta corse
de la vendetta del peccato antico.

[94] E quando il dente longobardo morse
la Santa Chiesa, sotto le sue ali
Carlo Magno, vincendo, la soccorse.

[97] Omai puoi giudicar di quei cotali
ch'io accusai di sopra e di lor falli,
che son cagion di tutti vostri mali.

[100] L'uno al pubblico segno i gigli gialli
oppone, e l'altro appropria quello a parte,
sì ch'è fortè a veder chi più si falli.

[103] Faccian li Ghibellin, faccian lor arte
sott' altro segno, ché mal segue quello
sempre chi la giustizia e lui diparte;

[106] e non l'abbatta esto Carlo novello
coi Guelfi suoi, ma tema de li artigli
ch'a più alto leon trasser lo vello.

[109] Molte fiate già pianser li figli
per la colpa del padre, e non si creda
che Dio trasmuti l'armi per suoi gigli!

[112] Questa picciola Stella si correda
d'i buoni spirti che son stati attivi
perché onore e fama li succeda:

[115] e quando li disiri poggian quivi,
sì disviando, pur convien che i raggi
del vero amore in sù poggin men vivi.

[118] Ma nel commensurar d'i nostri gaggi
col merto è parte di nostra letizia,
perché non li vedem minor né maggi.

[121] Quindi addolcisce la viva giustizia
in noi l'affetto sì, che non si puote
torcer già mai ad alcuna nequizia.

[124] Diverse voci fanno dolci note;
così diversi scanni in nostra vita
rendon dolce armonia tra queste rote.

[127] E dentro a la presente margarita
luce la luce di Romeo, di cui
fu l'ovra grande e bella mal gradita.

[130] Ma i Provenzai che fecer contra lui
non hanno riso; e però mal cammina
qual si fa danno del ben fare altrui.

[133] Quattro figlie ebbe, e ciascuna reina,
Ramondo Beringhiere, e ciò li fece
Romeo, persona umile e peregrina.

[136] E poi il mosser le parole biece
a dimandar ragione a questo giusto,
che li assegnò sette e cinque per diece,

[139] indi partissi povero e vetusto;
e se 'l mondo sapesse il cor ch'elli ebbe
mendicando sua vita a frusto a frusto,

[142] assai lo loda, e più lo loderebbe.'

CANTO 6

[1]* Since Constantine first turned the Eagle's flight
against the path, east – west, that Heaven's course takes,
(once followed by the Patriarch who chose, as wife,

[4] Lavinia) a hundred years and then a hundred more,
God's bird had kept to Europe's farthest bounds,
close by the mountains of its origin.

[7] Under the shadow of its sacred plumes,
from hand to hand it governed all the world,
and came by due succession into mine.

[10] I, emperor once, am now Justinian.
And by the will of primal love – which I know here –
I purged our laws of emptiness and dross.

[13]* Before I set my mind upon this work,
I'd thought of Christ as single and divine –
not truly man – contented in that faith.

[16] But then the blessed Agapetus – shepherd
supreme – led me, by words of his, aright,
to find pure faith, unsullied and complete.

[19] I trusted him, believed him, and now see
what he in faith upheld – as clear as you,
by logic, prove one thought is false, one true.

[22] As soon as I walked onward with the Church,
then God so pleased, through grace, to breathe in me
the great design on which I set all thought.

[25] My troops I gave in trust to Belisarius
and Heaven's right hand allied itself with his.
These triumphs were a sign to settle thus.

[28] This answer punctuates your first demand.
But, even so, these words imply much more.
I'm therefore bound to add a further note,

[31] so you can see how right those are (Oh yes!
So right!) to move against that holiest of signs,
to challenge it or claim it as their own.

[34]* Look at its powers! These make all reverence due,

these virtues that were born in that same hour
when, dying, Pallas gained the Sign its realm.

[37] The Eagle dwelt in Alba (as you'll know)
three hundred years or more until, at last,
Three fought with three, to win that Sign for Rome.

[40] You also know what deeds, through seven reigns,
the great sign wrought (the Sabine wound,
Lucretia's grief), defeating tribes around.

[43] You know its exploits, borne by Roman pride,
against the Brenner Gaul and Pyrrhus, too,
against all other princedoms, states or guilds.

[46] Torquatus, Quintus (known, for unkempt hair,
as 'Tousel-head'), the Decii and Fabians,
all these won fame which here I gladly laud.

[49] The Eagle, too, laid low the Arab boast
that passed, in steps that followed Hannibal,
the alpine cliffs from which, great Po, you glide.

[52] Beneath that Sign, young Scipio won his crown,
young Pompey, too. And bitter it appeared
to that great hill beneath which you were born.

[55]* Then near the time when all the heavens willed
to lead the world back to serenity,
Caesar, by will of Rome, took up the Sign.

[58] And then Isère and Loire and Seine beheld,
from Var to Rhine, what that could do – and all
those streaming valleys that supply the Rhône.

[61] And then it left Ravenna and achieved,
leaping the Rubicon, such things in flight
that neither tongue nor pen could seek to trace.

[64] Next, towards Spain it swung its warrior might,
then to Durazzo in Albania.

It struck Farsalia. And hot Nile felt the pain.

[67] Atandros, then, and Simois (whence it sprang)
it saw once more, and Hector's resting place.
And then to Ptolemy's harm it shook its wings,

[70] then fell on Juba, flashing thunder bolts.
From there it turned towards your western realms

and heard Pompean trumpets sounding there.

[73] For all it bore through its next stewardship,
Brutus in Hell and Cassius both bark.

And Modena – Perugia, too – once grieved for that.

[76] Sad Cleopatra also weeps for it.
By snake bite, fleeing as that Sign advanced,
she met her sudden and atrocious death.

[79] Then, carried in Augustus' hand, it ran
towards the Red Sea coast and brought such peace
to all the world that Janus's shrine was locked.

[82] Yet everything that Sign (which moves my speech)
had done till now, or then went on to do,
throughout the mortal realm that lies in thrall,

[85] is seemingly but little and obscure
if now, clear-sightedly, with heart made pure,
you look in wonder at Tiberius' hands.

[88] For, to the hands of that third emperor,
the Living Justice that inspires me now
granted the glory to avenge His ire.

[91] Now look in wonder at my counter charge:
the Sign then ran, in Titus's reign, to take
due vengeance for the ancient sin avenged.

[94]*And when the godless teeth of Lombard hordes
bit deep in Holy Church, then Charlemagne,
victorious beneath its wings, brought aid.

[97] You can now pass a judgement on all those,
with all their faults, whom I accused above,
the cause of all the ills that fall on you.

[100] Some set, against that universal Sigh,
their tinsel lilies, while the rest will claim
the Sign's their own. Hard, this: who's more to blame?

[103] Let them go on, the Ghibellines, and ply
their craft beneath some other sign than this.
All, prising it from justice, serve it ill.

[106] Nor let the Guelfs of upstart Charles Anjou
assail that Sign but rather fear those claws
that ripped the hide from prouder whelps than these.

[109] Children, as often happens, rue in tears
the crimes their fathers did. Don't think that God
will change his lawful arms to lily flowers.

[112] This little star is finely fitted out
with souls who, noble in their deeds, still sought
that fame and honour should live after them.

[115] But when desires incline to aim at that,
the rays of truthful love – thus wandering off –
must needs incline, above, to lesser life.

[118] To calculate the balance, though, between
reward and merit is a part, for us,
of happiness, seeing there's neither more nor less.

[121] Thus Living Justice sweetly shapes and fits
a longing for the good within our hearts,
so this cannot be wrenched to any wrong.

[124] As, differing, voices sing a sweet-tuned chord,
so, too, in our life here, from differing thrones,
sweet harmonies are sent through all these wheels.

[127]*-And here, within this pearl that flowers for you,
there shines the shining light of Romeo,
whose deeds, so fine and good, were ill-received.

[130] Those lords, though, of Provence, opposed to him,
well, they've no cause. They'll come to grief,
taking amiss another's virtuous deeds.

[133] Four daughters he had, Raymond Berengar.
Each was a queen. And all was done
by Romeo, that strange and humble traveller.

[136] Then slanderous tongues led Raymond to demand
a full account of this most honest man,
who'd paid him back for ten at seven plus five.

[139] So, destitute and aged, he left that shore.
But if the world had only known his heart,
begging his life away from crust to crust,

[142] then, praise him as they do, they'd praise him more.'

Canto 7

[1] *'Osanna, sanctus Deus sabaòth,
superillustrans claritate tua
felices ignes horum malacòth!'*

[4] Così, volgendosi a la nota sua,
fu viso a me cantare essa sustanza,
sopra la qual doppio lume s'addua;

[7] ed essa e l'altre mossero a sua danza,
e quasi velocissime faville
mi si velar di sùbita distanza.

[10] Io dubitava e dicea 'Dille, dille!'
fra me, 'dille' dicea, 'a la mia donna
che mi diseta con le dolci stille.'

[13] Ma quella reverenza che s'indonna
di tutto me, pur per *Be* e per *ice*,
mi richinava come l'uom ch'assonna.

[16] Poco sofferse me cotal Beatrice
e cominciò, raggiandomi d'un riso
tal, che nel foco faria l'uom felice:

[19] 'Secondo mio infallibile avviso,
come giusta vendetta giustamente
punita fosse, t'ha in pensier miso;

[22] ma io ti solverò tosto la mente;
e tu ascolta, ché le mie parole
di gran sentenza ti faran presente.

[25] Per non soffrire a la virtù che vole
freno a suo prode, quell' uom che non nacque,
dannando sé, dannò tutta sua prole;

[28] onde l'umana specie inferma giacque
giù per secoli molti in grande errore,
fin ch'al Verbo di Dio discender piacque

[31] u' la natura, che dal suo fattore

s'era allungata, unì a sé in persona
con l'atto sol del suo eterno amore.

[34] Or drizza il viso a quel ch'or si ragiona:
questa natura al suo fattore unita,
qual fu creata, fu sincera e buona;

[37] ma per sé stessa pur fu ella sbandita
di paradiso, però che si torse
da via di verità e da sua vita.

[40] La pena dunque che la croce porse
s'a la natura assunta si misura,
nulla già mai sì giustamente morse;

[43] e così nulla fu di tanta ingiura,
guardando a la persona che sofferse,
in che era contratta tal natura.

[46] Però d'un atto uscir cose diverse:
ch'a Dio e a' Giudei piacque una morte;
per lei tremò la terra e 'l ciel s'aperse.

[49] Non ti dee oramai parer più forte,
quando si dice che giusta vendetta
poscia vengiata fu da giusta corte.

[52] Ma io veggi' or la tua mente ristretta
di pensiero in pensier dentro ad un nodo,
del qual con gran disio solver s'aspetta.

[55] Tu dici: "Ben discerno ciò ch'i' odo;
ma perché Dio volesse, m'è occulto,
a nostra redenzion pur questo modo."

[58] Questo decreto, frate, sta sepulto
a li occhi di ciascuno il cui ingegno
ne la fiamma d'amor non è adulto.

[61] Veramente, però ch'a questo segno
molto si mira e poco si discerne,
dirò perché tal modo fu più degno.

[64] La divina bontà, che da sé sperne
ogne livore, ardendo in sé, sfavilla
sì che dispiega le bellezze etterne.

[67] Ciò che da lei senza mezza distilla
non ha poi fine, perché non si move

la sua impronta quand' ella sigilla.

[70] Ciò che da essa senza mezzo piove
libero è tutto, perché non soggiace
a la virtute de le cose nove.

[73] Più l'è conforme, e però più le piace;
ché l'ardor santo ch'ogne cosa raggia,
ne la più somigliante è più vivace.

[76] Di tutte queste dote s'avvantaggia
l'umana creatura, e s'una manca,
di sua nobilità convien che caggia.

[79] Solo il peccato è quel che la disfranca
e falla dissimile al sommo bene,
per che del lume suo poco s'imbianca;

[82] e in sua dignità mai non rivene,
se non riempie, dove colpa vòta,
contra mal dilettrar con giuste pene.

[85] Vostra natura, quando peccò *tota*
nel seme suo, da queste dignitadi,
come di paradiso, fu remota;

[88] né ricovrar potiensì, se tu badi
ben sottilmente, per alcuna via,
senza passar per un di questi guadi:

[91] o che Dio solo per sua cortesia
dimesso avesse, o che l'uom per sè isso
avesse sodisfatto a sua follia.

[94] Ficca mo l'occhio per entro l'abisso
de l'eterno consiglio, quanto puoi
al mio parlar distrettamente fisso.

[97] Non potea l'uomo ne' termini suoi
mai sodisfar, per non potere ir giuso
con umiltate obediendo poi,

[100] quanto disobediendo intese ir suso;
e questa è la cagion per che l'uom fue
da poter sodisfar per sédischiuso.

[103] Dunque a Dio convenia con le vie sue
riparar l'omo a sua intera vita,
dico con l'una, o ver con amendue.

[106] Ma perché l'ovra tanto e più gradita
da l'operante, quanto più appresenta
de la bontà del core ond' ell' è uscita,

[109] la divina bontà che 'l mondo imprenta,
di proceder per tutte le sue vie,
a rilevarvi suso, fu contenta.

[112] Né tra l'ultima notte e 'l primo die
sì alto o sì magnifico processo,
o per l'una o per l'altra, fu o fie:

[115] ché più largo fu Dio a dar sé stesso
per far l'uom sufficiente a rilevarsi,
che s'elli avesse sol da sé dimesso;

[118] e tutti li altri modi erano scarsi
a la giustizia, se 'l Figliuol di Dio
non fosse umiliato ad incarnarsi.

[121] Or per empierti bene ogne disio,
ritorno a dichiararti in alcun loco,
perché tu veggi lì così com' io.

[124] Tu dici: "Io veggio l'acqua, io veggio il foco,
l'aere e la terra e tutte lor misture
venire a corruzione, e durar poco;

[127] e queste cose pur furon creature;
per che, se ciò ch'è detto è stato vero,
esser dovrien da corruzion sicure."

[130] Li angeli, frate, e 'l paese sincero
nel qual tu se', dir si posson creati,
sì come sono, in loro essere intero;

[133] ma li alimenti che tu hai nomati
e quelle cose che di lor si fanno
da creata virtù sono informati.

[136] Creata fu la materia ch'elli hanno;
creata fu la virtù informante
in queste stelle che 'ntorno a lor vanno.

[139] L'anima d'ogne bruto e de le piante
di complession potenziata tira
lo raggio e 'l moto de le luci sante;

[141] ma vostra vita senza mezzo spira

la somma beninanza, e la innamora
di sé sì che poi sempre la disira.

[145] E quinci puoi argomentare ancora
vostra resurrezion, se tu ripensi
come l'umana carne fessi allora

[148] che li primi parenti intrambo fensi.'

CANTO 7

[1]* ‘*Osanna, sanctus Deus sabaòth,
superillustrans claritate tua
felices ignes horum malacòtb !*’

[4] Thus – circling on himself, to his own tune –
was seen by me the singing of that *ens*,
a double light as two-ing over him.

[7] Into their dance they moved, this light and all.
And then with utter speed, like sparks of fire,
they veiled themselves from me in sudden distance.

[10] I, still in doubt, was saying: ‘Tell her! Tell her!’
within myself still saying: ‘Tell my lady!’
Her words drop sweet and take my thirst away.’

[13] Yet awe of her – its power en-ladying
the whole of me, hearing no more than ‘Be–’ or ‘–ice’ –
kept me, as though some drowsy soul, head down.

[16] She did not suffer me to be so long,
but now began, arraying round me there
smile to make men happy in Hell’s fire:

[19] ‘As I, to look at you, can tell unerringly,
a doubt has fixed in you: how vengeance might,
in justice, fall on vengeance justly wrought?’

[22] But I shall quickly free your mind from knots.
Attend to me. The words I am to speak
will bring you doctrine of the greatest weight.

[25] Because the unborn first of men would bear
no curb, for his own good, on power of will,
damning himself, he damned all born to him.

[28] The human race, because of this, lay sick –
great error deepening down the centuries –
until it pleased the Logos to descend

[31] to where our nature, long abandoning
its maker, was made one, as *person*, with Him,
by action solely of eternal love.

[34] Now fix your eye on what we’re now to say.

This nature, with its maker once at one,
once was, without addition, pure and good,

[37] but then was banished of its own accord
from Paradise. For, of itself, it turned aside
from its own life, from truth – its proper road.

[40] The sentence, therefore, that the Cross imposed,
if measured by the nature thus assumed,
was just and true. No pain was ever more.

[43] Conversely, none, unjustly, did such harm,
considering what person bore the pain,
conjoined within a nature such as that.

[46] Thus from the self-same act flowed different things.
One death delighted both the Jews and God.
At this earth trembled, Heaven opened wide.

[49] You should not, therefore, find it hard to see
why vengeance, in itself completely just,
was then avenged by action of just court.

[52] But now once more I see that mind of yours
is knotted up, and snags from thought to thought.
You wait in great desire to be set loose.

[55] “I understand,” you say, “what I have heard.
But this to me is hidden still, why God
for our redemption willed this way alone?”

[58] That ordinance, dear brother, lies entombed,
unseen by anyone whose mind, as yet,
is immature, untempered by love’s flame.

[61] For all that – since so many aim at this,
yet very few are clear about their mark –
I’ll tell you why that way was right and finest.

[64] The generosity of God which scorns
all spite and meanness burns within itself,
yet, flaring out, unfolds eternal beauties.

[67]*-Whatever – without second cause – distils
directly from the source of good can have
no end. Stamped thus by good, the print won’t move.

[70] Whatever – without a second cause – rains down
from good is wholly free, and does not lie

subjected to the power of things new-made.

[73] Conformed to good, it pleases good the more.
That holy fire, whose rays strike everything,
lives brightest in what most resembles it.

[76] The human creature thrives, endowed with all
these gifts and benefits. But if one fails
it must be that its dignity will fall.

[79] And sin alone deprives it of its freedoms
by rendering it unlike the highest good,
so that it whitens little in that gleam.

[82] Nor can it ever regain dignity
without replenishing what guilt makes vain,
with just amends to match its false delight.

[85] Your nature in its seed sinned *totally*,
and so from all these honours was removed –
as was it also out of Paradise.

[88] Nor could these honours ever be restored
unless – if you will note this subtlety –
it made its way through one of these two fords:

[91] either that God, in all his courteous grace,
should freely pardon us, or man himself
should offer satisfaction for such madness.

[94] Now point your penetrating eye within
the chasm of eternal Mind, and fix
on what I say as tightly as you can.

[97] Mankind could not, within its natural bounds,
give satisfaction, ever; none could fall,
obedient in humility, as far

[100] as, disobeying, it had sought to rise.
That is the reason why the way was closed
for man to offer proper satisfaction.

[103] So this was right: that God by His own means
should bring us back to fullness in our lives,
by one way or – I'd say – by both at once.

[106] But since an act will please the agent more
the more it represents to view the heart
of generosity from which it flowed,

[109] so, too, that holy generosity
which stamps the universe chose happily
in all His ways to raise you up once more.

[112] Between the last great night and first of days
there's never been nor shall be, either way,
a process soaring, so magnificent.

[115] For God, in giving of Himself to make
humanity sufficient to restore itself,
gave more than, granting pardon, He'd have done.

[118] All other means, in justice, would have come
far short, had not the very Son of God
bowed humbly down to take on human flesh.

[121] So now to make you see as I do here
and bring to their fulfilment your desires,
go back and clarify a certain point.

[124]*"I see," you'll say, "the waters. And I see
fire, air and earth and all their compounds fail,
come to decay and last no time at all.

[127] Yet these were creatures in creation, too.
And so, if what you've told me is the truth,
these likewise should be safe from gross decay."

[130] The angels, and this pure place where you are,
rightly are known, dear brother, as "created" –
their being formed complete as they are now.

[133]*But all those elements that you have named,
and everything that might be made from them,
re formed as such by some created power.

[136] Matter, which they possess, was thus "created",
"Created", too, the power informing them,
descending from the stars that circle round.

[139] As mere "complected" possibility,
the very souls of beasts and growing things
draw light and motion from the sacred stars.

[141] But your life – through no second cause – is breathed
by Highest Goodness which then brings that life
to love such good and always long for it.

[145] And from this principle you may infer

the resurrection you yourselves will have.

Return and think how human flesh was made

[148] when our first parents were themselves made live.'

Canto 8

[1] Solea creder lo mondo in suo periclo
che la bella Ciprigna il folle amore
aggiasse, volta nel terzo epiciclo;

[4] per che non pur a lei faceano onore
di sacrificio e di votivo grido
le genti antiche ne l'antico errore;

[7] ma Dione onoravano e Cupido,
quella per madre sua, questo per figlio,
e dicean ch'el sedette in grembo a Dido;

[10] e da costei ond' io principio piglio
pigliavano il vocabol de la stella
che 'l sol vagheggia or da coppa or da ciglio.

[13] Io non m'accorsi del salire in ella;
ma d'esservi entro mi fe assai fede
la donna mia ch'i' vidi far più bella.

[16] E come in fiamma fa villa si vede,
e come in voce voce si discerne,
quand' una è ferma e altra va e riede,

[19] vid' io in essa luce altre lucerne
muoversi in giro più e men correnti,
al modo, credo, di lor viste interne.

[22] Di fredda nube non disceser venti,
o visibili o no, tanto festini,
che non paressero impediti e lenti

[25] a chi avesse quei lumi divini
veduti a noi venir, lasciando il giro
pria cominciato in li alti Serafini;

[28] e dentro a quei che più innanzi appariro
sonava 'Osanna' sì, che unque poi
di riudir non fui senza disiro.

[31] Indi si fece l'un più presso a noi

e solo incominciò: ‘Tutti sem presti
al tuo piacer, perchè di noi ti gioi.

[34] Noi ci volgiam coi principi celesti
d’un giro e d’un girare e d’una sete,
ai quali tu del mondo già dicesti:

[37] “*Voi che ’ntendendo il terzo del movete*”;
e sem sì pien d’amor, che, per piacerti,
non fia men dolce un poco di quiete.’

[40] Poscia che li occhi miei si fuoro offerti
a la mia donna reverenti, ed essa
fatti li avea di se contenti e certi,

[43] rivolsersi a la luce che promessa
tanto s’avea, e ‘Deh, chi siete?’ fue
la voce mia di grande affetto impressa.

[46] E quanta e quale vid’ io lei far piùe
per allegrezza nova che s’accrebbe,
quando parlai, a l’allegrezze sue!

[49] Così fatta, mi disse: ‘Il mondo m’ebbe
giù poco tempo; e se più fosse stato,
molto sarà di mal, che non sarebbe.

[52] La mia letizia mi ti tien celato
che mi raggia dintorno e mi nasconde
quasi animal di sua seta fasciato.

[55] Assai m’amasti, e avesti ben onde;
che s’io fossi giù stato, io ti mostrava
di mio amor più oltre che le fronde.

[58] Quella sinistra riva che si lava
di Rodano poi ch’è misto con Sorga,
per suo signore a tempo m’aspettava,

[61] e quei corno d’Ausonia che s’imborga
di Bari e di Gaeta e di Catona,
da ove Tronto e Verde in mare sgorga.

[64] Fulgeami già in fronte la corona
di quella terra che ’l Danubio riga
poi che le ripe tedesche abbandona.

[67] E la bella Trinacria, che caliga
tra Pachino e Peloro, sopra ’l golfo

che riceve da Euro maggior briga,

[70] non per Tifeo ma per nascente solfo,
attesi avrebbe li suoi regi ancora,
nati per me di Carlo e di Ridolfo,

[73] se mala signoria, che sempre accora
li popoli soggetti, non avesse
mosso Palermo a gridar: “Mora, mora”

[76] E se mio frate questo antivedesse,
l’avara povertà di Catalogna
già fuggeria, perché non li offendesse;

[79] ché veramente provveder bisogna
per lui, o per altrui, sì ch’a sua barca
carcata più d’incarco non si pogna.

[82] La sua natura, che di larga parca
discese, avria mestier di tal milizia
che non curasse di mettere in area.’

[85] ‘Però ch’i’ credo che l’alta letizia
che ’l tuo parlar m’infonde, signor mio,
là ’ve ogni ben si termina e s’inizia,

[88] per te si veggia come la vegg’ io,
grata m’è più; e anco quest’ ho caro
perché ’l discerni rimirando in Dio.

[91] Fatto m’hai lieto, e così mi fa chiaro,
poi che, parlando, a dubitar m’hai mosso
com’ esser può, di dolce seme, amaro.’

[94] Questo io a lui; ed elli a me: ‘S’io posso
mostrarti un vero, a quel che tu dimandi
terrai lo viso come tien lo dosso.

[97] Lo ben che tutto il regno che tu scandi
volge e contenta, fa esser virtute
sua provvidenza in questi corpi grandi.

[100] E non pur le nature provvidute
sono in la mente ch’è da sé perfetta,
ma esse insieme con la lor salute:

[103] per che quantunque quest’ arco saetta
disposto cade a provviduto fine,
sì come cosa in suo segno diretta.

[106] Se ciò non fosse, il ciel che tu cammine
produrrebbe sì li suoi effetti,
che non sarebbero arti, ma mine;

[109] e ciò esser non può, se li 'ntelletti
che muovon queste stelle non son manchi,
a manco il primo, che non li ha perfetti.

[112] Vuo' tu che questo ver più ti s'imbianchi?'
E io: 'Non già; chè impossibil veggio
che la natura, in quel ch'è uopo, stanchi.'

[115] Ond' elli ancora: 'Or dì: sarebbe il peggio
per l'omo in terra, se non fosse cive?'
'Sì,' rispuos' io; 'e qui ragion non cheggio.'

[118] 'E puot' elli esser, se giù non si vive
diversamente per diversi officii?
Non, se 'l maestro vostro ben vi scrive.'

[121] Sì venne deducendo infino a quici;
poscia conchiuse: 'Dunque esser diverse
convien di vostri effetti le radici:

[124] per ch'un nasce Solone e altro Serse,
altro Melchisedèch e altro quello
che, volando per l'aere, il figlio perse.

[127] La circular natura, ch'è suggello
a la cera mortal, fa ben sua arte,
ma non distingue l'un da l'altro ostello.

[130] Quinci addivien ch'Esaù si diparte
per seme da Iacòb; e vien Quirino
da sì vil padre, che si rende a Marte.

[133] Natura generata il suo cammino
simil farebbe sempre a' generanti,
se non vincesses il proveder divino.

[136] Or quel che t'era dietro t'é davanti:
ma perchè sappi che di te mi giova,
un corollario voglio che t'ammanti.

[139] Sempre natura, se fortuna trova
discorde a sé, com' ogne altra semente
fuor di sua region, fa mala prova.

[142] E se 'l mondo là giù ponesse mente

al fondamento che natura pone,
seguendo lui, avria buona la gente.

[145] Ma voi torcete a la religione
tal che fia nato a cignersi la spada,
e fate re di tal ch'è da sermone;

[148] onde la traccia vostra è fuor di strada.'

CANTO 8

[1] The world, while still in danger, once believed
that Venus (lovely Cyprian), whirling
through Epicyclon Three, rayed down mad love,

[4] so that, in age-old error, folk of old
did her all honour. And not her alone.

In sacrifice and cries of supplication,

[7] they, for her sake, would honour Dione
(mother to her), and Cupid, too (her son,
who sat, their stories said, in Dido's lap).

[10] From her – as I now pluck my opening line –
they took her name, and gave it to the star
whose love-looks at the sun touch nape then brow.

[13] I had no sense of rising there. And yet
my faith at being now within, she made
quite sure: I saw my lady lovelier.

[16] As fire-flecks in a flame can still be seen,
as voices voiced in chorus sound distinct
when one, while others vary, holds its note,

[19] so in that light I now saw torches lit
that ran in moving spirals – quick, less quick,
according, I suppose, to inward sight.

[22] From chill-compacted clouds no wind – unseen
or seen – has ever shot so swiftly down
as not to seem arrested, loaded, slow,

[25] to anyone who'd seen these holy lights
(as they came up to us) who left the gyre
that starts among the highest Seraphim.

[28] And deep in those who earliest appeared
there sounded an 'Hosannah', so, then on,
I lacked no urge to hear it once again.

[31] Then one of these, approaching closer still,
began, alone: 'We all are quick to hear
that you might please, so you'll delight in us.

[34]*-We turn at one with royal celestial lords,

one single spire, one spiralling, one thirst.

You, in the world, addressed those angels thus:

[37] “*O you whose intellection moves Sphere Three...*”

We, being full of love, are no less pleased
to rest a while, to please you, than to move.’

[40] Towards my lady, first, in reverence
I bowed my eyes and, once she’d granted them
agreement and assurance of herself,

[43] I turned again towards that source of light
which had, before, made promise of so much,
my voice impressed with longing warmth: ‘*Who are you?*’

[46] How, with new happiness, in strength and kind,
that light, when I addressed it, now increased,
adding more happiness to what it had!

[49] So, altered now, he said to me: ‘The world
held me, down there, no time at all. Had that
been more, much ill to come would not have been.

[52] My happiness conceals me from you still.
Its rays shine round me, and they keep me hid,
as though some creature swathed in its own silk.

[55] You loved me well – and with good reason, too.
For were I still down there, I would have shown
far more of how I love you than leaf-green.

[58]*-The leftward bank rinsed clean by flowing Rhône
(before that river mingles with the Sorgue)
awaited me, my hour now come, as lord,

[61]*-so, too, the Ausonian Horn (its fortresses
are Bari, Croton and Gaeta) stretched
between where Tronto and Verde reach the sea.

[64] There gleamed already on my brows the crown
of regions that the Danube irrigates –
then once it leaves behind its German shores.

[67] Trinacria (lovely Sicily) where fumes
of sulphur, born from Etna’s core – so *not*
breathed out by giant Typhoeus – form

[70] in that gulf, whipped up by Eurus gusts,
between the capes Pachynus and Peloras,

would still have looked for princes born as heirs,

[73] through me, to Charles and Rudolph, had misrule –
which chafes upon a subject race – not stirred
Palermo's scream: "Death to them French. Death! Death!"

[76]*And would my brother only look ahead,
he'd learn to flee the tight-wad neediness
of Catalonian ministers and not get hurt.

[79] For he – or someone – ought to take that view,
lest loading up his now well-laden ship,
his cargo of extortion prove too great.

[82] His temperament, the mean descendant
of a generous race, has need of officers
who do not strive to line their treasure chests.'

[85] 'Because, my lord, the soaring happiness
your words pour into me is seen, I think,
by you, where all that's good begins and ends,

[88] as clearly as I see it in myself,
it's yet more welcome, and I prize it well,
since you behold it gazing back to God.

[91] You've made me light of heart. Now make me clear,
since, speaking, you have brought this doubt to me:
how can it be that sweet seed leads to sour?'

[94] So I to him. He in reply: 'If only
I can show you truth, you'll hold your eyes
to what you ask where now your shoulders are.

[97] The Good, which turns the whole domain you climb
and brings it joy, forms from its providence
the power that works in all these cosmic limbs.

[100] Nor is the way things are alone foreseen
within that mind, which of itself is whole,
but equally *how* each thing best may thrive.

[103] And so, whatever bolt this bow may shoot
will arc down, shaped towards an end foreseen,
as things do when directed to their mark.

[106] Were this not so, the spheres you journey through
would bring all their effects about in ways
that count as chaos, not as skill or art.

[109] And that can't be – unless the angel-minds
that move these stars were failing in their acts –
the first as well, for not perfecting them.

[112] This truth – you'd have me make it shine still more?'
I: 'Not at all. It is, I see, impossible
that Nature, at that need, should ever tire.'

[115] So he once more: 'For those who live on earth,
would it be worse if they weren't citizens?'
'Yes,' I replied. 'And here I don't ask why.'

[118] 'And could it be that men should live down there
except by difference in their different tasks?
By no means – if your teacher writes the truth.'

[121] He'd reached this point by formal argument,
and then, concluding: 'It must therefore be
that there are differing roots for what you do.'

[124]*So one is born as Xerxes, one as Solon.
One is Melchizedek, another still
the craftsman, borne on air, who lost his son.

[127] All-circling Nature who imprints the stamp
on mortal wax performs her function well,
and won't distinguish hostels high and low.

[130]*So Esau happens, by his astral seed,
to differ from his twin, while Romulus
was born so low that Mars was made his sire.

[133] The course of generated things would run
unchanged in nature from their generants,
if not defeated by God's providence.

[136] Now that which lay behind you stands ahead.
But so you'll know your joyous use to me,
I'd have you robed in this corollary:

[139] like any seed not sown in native soil,
Nature, on finding fortune out of tune,
will always give poor proof of what it is.

[142] And if the earthly world would set its mind.
to fundamentals set by Nature's hand,
pursuing these, you'd make a happy end.

[145] But you will twist to some religious role

a man who's borne to buckle on the sword,
and make a king of someone who should preach.

[148] And so your track goes wholly from the road.'

Canto 9

[1] Da poi che Carlo tuo, bella Clemenza,
m'ebbe chiarito, mi narrò li 'nganni
che ricever dovea la sua semenza;

[4] ma disse: 'Taci e lascia muover li anni';
sì ch'io non posso dir se non che pianto
giusto verrà di retro ai vostri danni.

[7] E già la vita di quel lume santo
rivolta s'era al Sol che la riempie
come quel ben ch'a ogne cosa è tanto.

[10] Ahi anime ingannate e fatture empie,
che da sì fatto ben torcete i cuori,
drizzando in vanità le vostre tempie!

[13] Ed ecco un altro di quelli splendori
ver' me si fece, e 'l suo voler piacermi
significava nel chiarir di fori.

[16] Li occhi di Beatrice, ch'eran fermi
sovra me, come pria, di caro assenso
al mio disio certificato fermi.

[19] 'Deh, metti al mio voler tosto compenso,
beato spirto,' dissi, 'e fammi prova
ch'i' possa in te reflecter quel ch'io penso!'

[21] Onde la luce che m'era ancor nova,
del suo profondo, ond' ella pria cantava,
seguette come a cui di ben far giova:

[25] 'In quella parte de la terra prava
italica che siede tra Rialto
e le fontane di Brenta e di Piava,

[28] si leva un colle, e non surge molt' alto,
là onde scese già una facella
che fece a la contrada un grande assalto.

[31] D'una radice nacqui e io ed ella:

Cunizza fui chiamata, e qui refulgo
perchè mi vinse il lume d'esta stella;

[34] ma lietamente a me medesima indulgo
la cagion di mia sorte, e non mi noia;
che parria forse forte al vostro vulgo.

[37] Di questa luculenta e cara gioia
del nostro cielo che più m'è propinqua,
grande fama rimase; e pria che moia,

[40] questo centesimo anno ancor s'incinqua:
vedi se far si dee l'omo eccellente,
sì ch'altra vita la prima relinqua.

[43] E ciò non pensa la turba presente
che Tagliamento e Adice richiude,
nè per esser battuta ancor si pente;

[46] ma tosto fia che Padova al palude
cangerà l'acqua che Vincenza bagna,
per essere al dover le genti crude;

[49] e dove Sile e Cagnan s'accompagna,
tal signoreggia e va con la testa alta,
che già per lui carpir si fa la ragna.

[52] Piangerà Feltro ancora la difalta
de l'empio suo pastor, che sarà sconda
sí, che per simil non s'entrò in malta.

[55] Troppo sarebbe larga la bigoncia
che ricevesse il sangue ferrarese,
e stanco chi 'l pesasse a oncia a oncia,

[58] che donerà questo prete cortese
per mostrarsi di parte; e cotai doni
conformi fieno al viver del paese.

[61] Sù sono specchi, voi dicete Troni,
onde refulge a noi Dio giudicante;
sì che questi parlar ne paion buoni.'

[64] Qui si tacette; e fecemi sembante
che fosse ad altro volta, per la rota
in che si mise com'era davante.

[67] L'altra letizia, che m'era già nota
per cara cosa, mi si fece in vista

qual fin balasso in che lo sol percuota.

[70] Per letiziar là sù fulgor s'acquista,
sì come riso qui; ma giù s'abbuia
l'ombra di fuor, come la mente è trista.

[73] 'Dio vede tutto, e tuo veder s'inluia,'
diss' io, 'beato spirto, sì che nulla
voglia di sè a te puot' esser fuia.

[76] Dunque la voce tua, che 'l ciel trastulla
sempre col canto di quei fuochi pii
che di sei ali facen la coculla,

[79] perchè non satisface a' miei disii?
Già non attendere' io tua dimanda,
s'io m'intuassi, come tu t'inmii.'

[82] 'La maggior valle in che l'acqua si spanda,'
incominciaro allor le sue parole,
'fuor di quel mar che la terra inghirlanda,

[85] tra' discordanti liti contra 'l sole
tanto sen va, che fa meridiano
là dove l'orizzonte pria far suole.

[88] Di quella valle fu' io litorano
tra Ebro e Macra, che per cammin corto
parte lo Genovese dal Toscano.

[91] Ad un occaso quasi e ad un orto
Buggea siede e la terra ond' io fui,
che fè del sangue suo già caldo il porto.

[94] Folco mi disse quella gente a cui
fu noto il nome mio; e questo cielo
di me s'imprenta, com' io fe' di lui;

[97] chè più non arse la figlia di Belo,
noiando e a Sicheo e a Creusa,
di me, infin che si convenne al pelo;

100 nè quella Rodopea che delusa
fu da Demofonte, nè Alcide
quando Iole nel core ebbe rinchiusa.

[103] Non però qui si pente, ma si ride,
non de la colpa, ch'a mente non torna,
ma del valor ch'ordinò e provide,

[106] Qui si rimira ne l'arte ch'addorna
cotanto affetto, e discernesi 'l bene
per che 'l mondo di sù quel di giù torna.

[109] Ma perchè tutte le tue voglie piene
ten porti che son nate in questa spera,
proceder ancor oltre mi conviene.

[112] Tu vuo' saper chi e in questa lumera
che qui appresso me così scintilla
come raggio di sole in acqua mera.

[115] Or sappi che là entro si tranquilla
Raab; e a nostr' ordine congiunta,
di lei nel sommo grado si sigilla.

[118] Da questo cielo, in cui l'ombra s'appunta
che 'l vostro mondo face, pria ch'altr' alma
del trionfo di Cristo fu assunta.

[121] Ben si convenne lei lasciar per palma
in alcun cielo de l'alta vittoria
che s'acquisto con l'una e l'altra palma,

[124] perch' ella favorò la prima gloria
di Iosué in sù la Terra Santa,
che poco tocca al papa la memoria.

[127] La tua città, che di colui è pianta
che pria volse le spalle al suo fattore
e di cui è la 'nvidia tanto pianta,

[130] produce e spande il maladetto fiore
c'ha disviate le pecore e li agni,
però che fatto ha lupo del pastore.

[133] Per questo l'Evangelio e i dottor magni
son derelitti, e solo ai Decretali
si studia, sì che pare a' lor vivagni.

[136] A questo intende il papa e' cardinali;
non vanno i lor pensieri a Nazarette,
là dove Gabriello aperse l'ali.

[139] Ma Vaticano e l'altre parti elette
di Roma che son state cimitero
a la milizia che Pietro seguette,

[142] tosto libere fien de l'avoltero.'

CANTO 9

[1] Lovely Clemenza, your dearest Carlo –
once having made that clear to me – went on
to tell the treacheries his seed would face,

[4] but said: ‘Be silent. Let the years move by.’
So there is nothing I can say, save this,
that grief deservedly will follow harm.

[7] The heart, already, of that holy light
had turned to meet the sun that filled it full,
the Good that is the All of all that is.

[10] You self-deceiving souls! Mere things-gone-wrong!
Twisting your hearts away from that true good,
you strain your brows direct to nothingness.

[13] Look now! Another of those splendours came
making towards me there, and signified,
in flares of brightness, it would do my will.

[16] The eyes of Beatrice, firm on me
as earlier, confirmed me in desire,
giving beloved assurance as before.

[19] So, longingly, I said: ‘You happy soul!
Quickly, in answer, balance what I will.
Prove that in you I can reflect my thought.’

[22] At which the light, still new before my eyes,
out of those depths from which it first had sung,
went on as though rejoicing in good deeds.

[25]* ‘In that degenerate, that *evil* part
of Italy that lies between Rialto
and the fountain-springs of Piave and Brent,

[28] a hill starts up – though not to any height –
from which there once came down a burning brand
who ravaged all the countryside around.

[31] From one same root, this torch and I were born.
Cunizza was my name, and I blaze here
because the light of Venus vanquished me.

[34] But gladly I myself forgive myself

that influence. It does not brood on me –
which will, to humdrum minds of yours, seem hard.

[37] Of this deep gleaming jewel that, nearest me,
rejoices in our heavenly sky, great fame
remains, nor will it die on earth until

[40] the full en-fiving of this hundredth year.
You see, then? Shouldn't men seek excellence,
bequeathing from their first a *second* life?

[43]*The present crowd, well, they don't think of that,
shut up between the Adige and Tagliament,
who even when they're beaten don't repent.

[46]*But Padua, whose folk so bitterly
resist what's right, will see its marshes change
as, soon, the streams that bathe Vicenza blush.

[49]*And where the Sile and the Cagnan join,
a lord, his head held high, struts brashly on.
The web is stretched already for his ambush.

[52] Feltre will soon bewail the treacherous fault
of its own bishop whose offence stinks more
than crimes that land you in a slimy Clink.

[55] The tub you'd need for Ferrarese blood
would have to be, in size, an extra-big,
and if you syphon it by drops, you'll flag.

[58] It's all that bishop's gift – and how polite! –
to prove so well his Guelf allegiances.
Such gifts will suit how people there all live.

[61]*Above are mirrors – you will call them Thrones –
where God, in judging all, shines back to us,
so that my bitter words are signs of good.'

[64] She now fell silent, and the look she gave
suggested that her thoughts had passed elsewhere,
returning to the wheel where she'd been first.

[67] That second happiness – of which, by now,
I knew the price – came on, to meet my sight,
like some fine ruby that the sun's rays pierce.

[70] As laughter here breeds laughter, there above
sheer happiness shoots brilliant flares. Below,

a darkening shadow marks the saddened mind.

[73] ‘God sees,’ I said, ‘all things, and your own sight,
you happy souls, in-hims itself in him
so no desire can steal away from you.

[76]*Why, then, does not your voice (which so delights
these spheres with that same song from holy fires
whso make themselves a hood of six great wings)

[79] bring my desires the satisfaction due?
If I in-you-ed myself as you in-me,
I would not still await what you might ask.’

[82] ‘The greatest ocean-trench that water fills’
– in this way he began his words to me –
‘except that sea which garlands all dry land,

[85] travels so far between opposing shores,
against the sun, that where the horizon
at first had been it makes its meridian.

[88]*I dwelt once on the shores of that great lake
between the Ebro and the Magra – whose stream
briefly divides the Genoan and Tuscan realms.

[91] Almost at one same point of dawn and dusk
sit both Boughia and the place I was,
which made its harbour warm with its own gore.

[94] Folco they called me, those who knew my name.
This heaven now bears my imprint, as once I,
on earth, beneath its influence, carried *its*.

[97]*For Dido – Belus’s daughter – in her love,
harming Creusa and Sichaeus too,
never burned more than I when young, untoursured.

[100]*Nor did the Rhodopeian girl, so tricked
by her Demophoon, nor did Alcides –
heart around Iole so closely locked.

[103] Yet here we don’t repent such things. We smile,
not, though, at sin – we don’t think back to that –
but at that Might that governs and provides.

[106] In wonder, we here prize the art to which
His power brings beauty, and discern the good
through which the world above turns all below.

[109] But so that you should take back satisfied
the doubts this sphere has bred within your will,
I need to make my way still further on.

[112]*-You wish to know who shines within that lamp
here close against my side and scintillates
as sun rays in the purest waters do.

[115] Then understand that Rahab in these depths
grows bright with peace. And she, at one with us,
has set the highest seal upon our ranks.

[118] She to this heaven, where earth's shadow points,
was lifted up before all other souls,
drawn there by Christ in his triumphal march.

[121] This much was right, for Rahab to be set
in some such heaven as a martyr's palm,
to mark the victory won by Christ's two palms.

[124] She looked with favour on that proud assault
of Joshua as victor in the Holy Land –
a place that hardly stirs the papal conscience.

[127]*-That town of yours, a thriving weed that he,
the first of all to shun his own creator,
has planted there (his mean-ness stirs complaint)

[130] breeds and distributes that accursed flower
that, since the shepherd has become a wolf,
leads from their proper path both sheep and lambs.

[133]*-The Gospels and the teachers of the Church
are, for sheer greed, abandoned. Decretals
(their margins show as much) are all one reads.

[136] The pope and cardinals are set on that.
Their thoughts will never turn to Nazareth,
where Gabriel once opened angel wings.

[139] The Vatican and other parts of Rome
which, chosen well, have been the burial ground
for all who followed Peter as his troop

[142] shall soon be free of this adultery.'

Canto 10

[1] Guardando nel suo Figlio con l'Amore
che l'uno e l'altro etternalmente spira,
lo primo e ineffabile Valore

[4] quanto per mente e per loco si gira
con tant' ordine fè, ch'esser non puote
senza gustar di lui chi ciò rimira.

[7] Leva dunque, lettore, a l'alte rote
meco la vista, dritto a quella parte
dove l'un moto e l'altro si percuote;

[10] e lì comincia a vagheggiar ne l'arte
di quel maestro che dentro a sé l'ama,
tanto che mai da lei l'occhio non parte.

[13] Vedi come da indi si dirama
l'oblico cerchio che i pianeti porta,
per sodisfare al mondo che li chiama.

[16] Che se la strada lor non fosse torta,
molta virtù nel ciel sarebbe in vano,
e quasi ogne potenza qua giù morta;

[19] e se dal dritto più o men lontano
fosse 'l partire, assai sarebbe manco
e giù e sù de l'ordine mondano.

[22] Or ti riman, lettor, sovra 'l tuo banco,
dietro pensando a ciò che si preliba,
s'esser vuoi lieto assai prima che stanco

[25] Messo t'ho innanzi: omai per te ti ciba;
chè a sè torce tutta la mia cura
quella materia ond' io son fatto scribe.

[28] Lo ministro maggior de la natura,
che del valor del ciel lo mondo imprenta
e col suo lume il tempo ne misura,

[31] con quella parte che sù si rammenta

congiunto, si girava per le spire
in che più tosto ognora s'appresenta;

[34] e io era con lui; ma del salire
non m'accors' io, se non com' uom s'accorge,
anzi 'l primo pensier, del suo venire.

[37] È Beatrice quella che sì scorge
di bene in meglio, sì subitamente
che l'atto suo per tempo non si sporge.

[40] Quant' esser convenia da sè lucente
quel ch'era dentro al sol dov' io entra'mi,
non per color, ma per lume parvente!

[43] Perch' io lo 'ngegno e l'arte e l'uso chiami,
sì nol direi che mai s'imaginasse;
ma creder puossi e di veder si brami.

[46] E se le fantasie nostre son basse
a tanta altezza, non è maraviglia;
chè sopra 'l sol non fu occhio ch'andasse.

[49] Tal era quivi la quarta famiglia
de l'alto Padre, che sempre la sazia,
mostrando come spira e come figlia.

[52] E Beatricè cominciò: 'Ringrazia,
ringrazia il Sol de li angeli, ch'a questo
sensibil t'ha levato per sua grazia.'

[55] Cor di mortal non fu mai sì digesto
a divozione e a rendersi a Dio
con tutto 'l suo gradir cotanto presto,

[58] come a quelle parole mi fee' io;
e sì tutto 'l mio amore in lui si mise,
che Beatrice eclissò ne l'oblio.

[61] Non le dispiacque; ma sì se ne rise,
che lo splendor de li occhi suoi ridenti
mia mente unita in più cose divise.

[64] Io vidi più folgór vivi e vincenti
far di noi centro e di sè far corona,
più dolci in voce che in vista lucenti:

[67] così cinger la figlia di Latona
vedem talvolta, quando l'aere è pregno,

sì che ritenga il fil che fa la zona.

[70] Ne la corte del cielo, ond' io rivegno,
si trovan molte gioie care e belle
tanto che non si posson trar del regno;

[73] e 'l canto di quei lumi era di quelle;
chi non s'impenna sì che là sù voli,
dal muto aspetti quindi le novelle.

[76] Poi, sì cantando, quelli ardenti soli
si fuor girati intorno a noi tre volte,
come stelle vicine a' fermi poli,

[79] donne mi parver, non da ballo sciolte,
ma che s'arrestin tacite, ascoltando
fin che le nove note hanno ricolte.

[82] E dentro a l'un senti' cominciar: 'Quando
lo raggio de la grazia, onde s'accende
verace amore e che poi cresce amando,

[85] moltiplicato in te tanto resplende,
che ti conduce sù per quella scala
u' senza risalir nessun discende;

[88] qual ti negasse il vin de la sua fiala
per la tua sete, in libertà non fora
se non com' acqua ch'al mar non si cala.

[91] Tu vuo' saper di quai piante s'infiora
questa ghirlanda che 'ntorno vagheggia
la bella donna ch'al ciel t'avvalora.

[94] Io fui de li agni de la santa greggia
che Domenico mena per cammino
u' ben s'impingua se non si vaneggia.

[97] Questi che m'è a destra più vicino,
frate e maestro fummi, ed esso Alberto
è di Cologna, e io Thomas d'Aquino.

[100] Se si di tutti li altri esser vuo' certo,
di retro al mio parlar ten vien col viso
girando su per lo beato serto.

[103] Quell' altro fiammeggiare esce del riso
di Grazian, che l'uno e l'altro foro
aiutò sì che piace in paradiso

[106] L'altro ch'appresso addorna il nostro coro,
quel Pietro fu che con la poverella
offerse a Santa Chiesa suo tesoro.

[109] La quinta luce, ch'è tra noi più bella,
spira di tale amor, che tutto 'l mondo
là giù ne gola di saper novella:

[112] entro v'è l'alta mente u' sì profondo
saver fu messo, che, se 'l vero è vero,
a veder tanto non surse il secondo.

[115] Appresso vedi il lume di quel cero
che giù in came più a dentro vide
l'angelica natura e 'l ministero.

[118] Ne l'altra piccioletta luce ride
quello awocato de' tempi cristiani
del cui latino Augustin si provide.

[121] Or se tu l'occhio de la mente trani
di luce in luce dietro a le mie lode,
già de l'ottava con sete rimani.

[124] Per vedere ogne ben dentro vi gode
l'anima santa che 'l mondo fallace
fa manifesto a chi di lei ben ode.

[127] Lo corpo ond' ella fu cacciata giace
giuso in Cieldauro; ed essa da martiro
e da essilio venne a questa pace.

[130] Vedi oltre fiammeggiar l'ardente spiro
d'Isidoro, di Beda e di Riccardo,
che a considerar fu più che viro.

[133] Questi onde a me ritorna il tuo riguardo,
è'l lume d'uno spirto che 'n pensieri
gravi a morir li parve venir tardo:

[136] essa è la luce eterna di Sigieri,
che, leggendo nel Vico de li Strami,
silogizzò invidiosi veri.'

[139] Indi, come orologio che ne chiami
ne l'ora che la sposa di Dio surge
a mattinar lo sposo perché l'ami,

[142] che l'una parte e l'altra tira e urge,

tin tin sonando con sì dolce nota,
che 'l ben disposto spirto d'amor turge;
[145] così vid' io la gloriosa rota
muoversi e render voce a voce in tempra
e in dolcezza ch'esser non pò nota
[148] se non cola dove gioir s'insempra.

CANTO 10

[1] Looking within his Son through that same Love
that Each breathes out eternally with Each,
the first and three-fold Worth, beyond all words,

[4] formed all that spins through intellect or space
in such clear order it can never be,
that we, in wonder, fail to taste Him there.

[7]*Lift up your eyes, then, reader, and, along with
me, look to those wheels directed to that part
where motions – yearly and diurnal – clash.

[10] And there, entranced, begin to view the skill
the Master demonstrates. Within Himself,
He loves it so, His looking never leaves.

[13] Look! Where those orbits meet, there branches off
the slanting circles that the planets ride
to feed and fill the world that calls on them.

[16] And were the path it takes not twisted so,
then many astral virtues would be wasted,
and almost all potential, down here, dead.

[19] And were the distance any more or less
from that straight course, then much – above and here –
so ordered in the world, would be a void.

[22] Now, reader, sit there at your lecture bench.
And, if you want not tedium but joy,
continue thinking of the sip you've had.

[25] I've laid it out. Now feed on it yourself.
The theme of which I'm made to be scribe
drags in its own direction all my thoughts.

[28]*The greatest minister of natural life
who prints the worth of Heaven on the world,
and measures time for us in shining light,

[31] conjoined with Aries (as we've called to mind),
was spinning through those spirals where, each hour,
its presence is revealed to us the sooner.

[34] And with him I was there, but no more knew

of making that ascent than anyone
will know a thought before it first appears.

[37] It's she – Beatrice – who sees the way,
from good to better still, so suddenly
her actions aren't stretched out in passing time.

[40] How brilliant they must all, themselves, have been
seen in the sun where I now came to be,
not in mere hue but showing forth pure light.

[43] Call as I might on training, art or wit,
no words of mine could make the image seen.
Belief, though, may conceive it, eyes still long.

[46] In us, imagination is too mean
for such great heights. And that's no miracle.
For no eye ever went beyond the sun.

[49] So shining there was that fourth family
that's always fed by one exalted Sire
with sight of what He breathes, what Son He has.

[52] And now, 'Give thanks,' Beatrice began.
'Give thanks to the Him, the Sun of all the angels.
In grace, He's raised you to this sun of sense.'

[55] No mortal heart was ever so well fed
to give itself devoutly to its God
so swiftly, with such gratitude and joy,

[58] as now, to hear her words ring, I became.
I set my love so wholly on that Sun
that He, in oblivion, eclipsed even Beatrice.

[61] This did not trouble her. She smiled at it.
And brightness from the laughter in her eyes
shared out to many things my one whole mind.

[64] Bright beyond seeing, I saw, now, many flares
make us their centre and themselves our crown,
still sweeter even in voice than radiance.

[67]*-Sometimes, in that same way, we see a zone
around Latona's daughter – lunar rays,
held in by gravid air, which form her belt,

[70] There in that heavenly court from which I come
are found so many jewels, so fine, so rare,

they cannot be abstracted from that realm.

[73] The singing of the lights was one of these.
So minds who don't, self-winged, coming flying here,
must wait to gather news from tongues struck mute.

[76] And when, still singing, all these burning suns
had spun three turns around us where we were –
as stars more swift the closer to fixed poles –

[79] girl-like in formal dance they looked to me,
in figure still but silent, pausing now,
listening until they caught the next new note.

[82] And deep in one of these I heard begin: 'When
rays of grace igniting love in truth –
those rays through which, in loving, love still grows –

[85] reflect in you so multiplied that you
are led along with them to climb this stair,
which none descends who will not rise again,

[88] whoever, seeing this, should then withhold
the wine flask that you thirst for counts as free
no more than rain *not* streaming to the ocean.

[91] You wish to know what plants these are – enflowered,
entranced – a garland round that *donna* who,
in beauty, strengthens you to dare the skies.

[94] I was a lamb within that holy flock
that Dominic conducts along the road
where "All grow fat who do not go astray".

[97]*This one, who here is nearest on my right,
was master to me, and a brother, too –
Albert of Köln. I'm Thomas Aquinas.

[100] And if you wish to know the rest as well,
then follow with your eyes the words I speak,
circling around this interwoven string.

[103] The next flame blazes out from Gratian's smile.
He's loved in Paradise for having served
both civil and ecclesial courts so well.

[106] Then next, that Peter ornaments our choir
who, like the widow in Saint Luke's account,
offered his treasured all to Holy Church.

[109] The fifth light, and the loveliest of us all,
breathes with such love that everyone down there
hungers to have fresh word if he is saved.

[112] A mind so high is there, to which was sent
knowledge so deep that, if the truth is true,
no second ever rose who saw so much.

[115] You see a candle shining by him there
that saw, while in the flesh, most inwardly
the nature of the angels and their works.

[118] Then in the very smallest of these lights
there smiles the one who spoke for Christian times.
Augustine cited him in what he wrote.

[121] Now if, to track my words of praise, you draw
the eye of intellect from light to light,
already you'll be thirsting for the eighth.

[124] Rejoicing, deep within, to see all good,
the blessed soul is there who made quite plain
the world's fallaciousness – to all who'd hear.

[127] The body he was driven from lies, now,
below in Golden Heaven Church. He came
to peace from exile, from his martyrdom.

[130] Burning beyond, you see the breathing fires
of Bede, then Isidore and Richard, too –
in contemplation he was more than man.

[133] The one from whom your glance returns to me
is light born of that spirit who, oppressed
in thought, saw death, it seemed, come all too slow.

[136] *This is the everlasting light of Siger,
whose lectures, given in Straw Alleyway,
argued for truths that won him envious hate.'

[139] And now, like clocks that call us at the hour
in which the Bride of God will leave her bed
to win the Bridegroom's love with morning song,

[142]*-where, working, one part drives, the other draws –
its 'ting-ting' sounding with so sweet a note
that now the spirit, well and ready, swells –

[145] so in its glory I beheld that wheel

go moving round and answer, voice to voice,
tuned to a sweetness that cannot be known,
[148] except up there where joy in-evers all.

Canto 11

[1] O insensata cura de' mortali,
quanto son difettivi silogismi
quei che ti fanno in basso batter l'ali!

[4] Chi dietro a *iura* e chi ad amforismi
sen giva, e chi seguendo sacerdozio,
e chi regnar per forza o per sofismi,

[7] e chi rubare e chi civil negozio,
chi nel diletto de la carne involto
s'affaticava e chi si dava a l'ozio,

[10] quando, da tutte queste cose sciolto,
con Beatrice m'era suso in cielo
cotanto gloriosamente accolto.

[13] Poi che ciascuno fu tomato ne lo
punto del cerchio in che avanti s'era,
fermossi, come a candellier candelo.

[16] E io senti' dentro a quella lumera
che pria m'avea parlato, sorridendo
incominciar, faccendosi più mera:

[19] 'Così com' io del suo raggio resplendo,
sì, riguardando ne la luce eterna,
li tuoi pensieri onde cagioni apprendo.

[22] Tu dubbi, e hai voler che si ricerna
in sì aperta e 'n sì distesa lingua
lo dicer mio, ch'al tuo sentir si sterna,

[25] ove dinanzi dissi: "U' ben s'impingua",
e là u' dissi: "Non nacque il secondo";
e qui è uopo che ben si distingua.

[28] La provedenza, che governa il mondo
con quel consiglio nel quale ogni aspetto
creato è vinto pria che vada al fondo,

[31] però che andasse ver' lo suo diletto

la sposa di colui ch'ad alte grida
disposò lei col sangue benedetto,

[34] in sè sicura e anche a lui più fida,
due principi ordinò in suo favore,
che quinci e quindi le fosser per guida.

[37] L'un fu tutto serafico in ardore;
l'altro per sapienza in terra fue
di cherubica luce uno splendore.

[40] De l'un dirò, però che d'amendue
si dice l'un pregiando, qual ch'om prende,
perch' ad un fine fur l'opere sue.

[43] Intra Tupino e l'acqua che discende
del colle eletto dal beato Ubaldo,
fertile costa d'alto monte pende,

[46] onde Perugia sente freddo e caldo
da Porta Sole; e di rietro le piange
per grave giogo Nocera con Gualdo.

[49] Di questa costa, là dov' ella frange
più sua rattezza, nacque al mondo un sole,
come fa questo talvolta di Gange.

[52] Però chi d'esso loco fa parole,
non dica Ascesi, chè direbbe corto,
ma Oriente, se proprio dir vuole.

[55] Non era ancor molto lontan da l'orto,
ch'el cominciò a far sentir la terra
de la sua gran virtute alcun conforto;

[58] chè per tal donna, giovinetto, in guerra
del padre corse, a cui, come a la morte,
la porta del piacer nessun diserra;

[61] e dinanzi a la sua spirital corte
et coram patre le si fece unito;
poscia di dì in dì l'amò più forte.

[64] Questa, privata del primo marito,
millecent' anni e più dispetta e scura
fino a costui si stette senza invito;

[67] nè valse udir che la trovò sicura
con Amiclate, al suon de la sua voce,

colui ch'a tutto 'l mondo fé paura;

[70] nè valse esser costante nè feroce,
sì che, dove Maria rimase giuso,
ella con Cristo pianse in sù la croce.

[73] Ma perch' io non proceda troppo chiuso,
Francesco e Povertà per questi amanti
prendi oramai nel mio parlar diffuso.

[76] La lor concordia e i lor lieti sembianti,
amore e maraviglia e dolce sguardo
acieno esser cagion di pensier santi;

[79] tanto che 'l venerabile Bernardo
si scalzò prima, e dietro a tanta pace
corse e, correndo, li parve esser tardo.

[82] Oh ignota ricchezza! oh ben ferace!
Scalzasi Egidio, scalzasi Silvestro
dietro a lo sposo, sì la sposa piace.

[85] Indi sen va quel padre e quel maestro
con la sua donna e con quella famiglia
che già legava l'umile capestro.

[88] Né li gravò viltà di cuor le ciglia
per esser fi' di Pietro Bernardone,
né per parer dispetto a maraviglia;

[91] ma regalmente sua dura intenzione
ad Innocenzio aperse, e da lui ebbe
primo sigillo a sua religi' one.

[94] Poi che la gente poverella crebbe
dietro a costui, la cui mirabil vita
meglio in gloria del ciel si canterebbe,

[97] di seconda corona redimita
fu per Onorio da l'Etterno Spiro
la santa voglia d'esto archimandrita.

[100] E poi che, per la sete del martiro,
ne la presenza del Soldan superba
predicò Cristo e li altri che 'l seguirono,

[103] e per trovare a conversione acerba
troppo la gente e per non stare indarno,
redissi al frutto de l'italica erba,

[106] nel crudo sasso intra Tevero e Arno
da Cristo prese l'ultimo sigillo,
che le sue membra due anni portarno.

[109] Quando a colui ch'a tanto ben sortillo
piacque di trarlo suso a la mercede
ch'el meritò nel suo farsi pusillo,

[112] a' frati suoi, sì com' a giuste rede,
raccomandò la donna sua più cara,
e comandò che l'amassero a fede;

[115] e del suo grembo l'anima preclara
mover si voile, tornando al suo regno,
e al suo corpo non voile altra bara.

[118] Pensa oramai qual fu colui che degno
collega fu a mantener la barca
di Pietro in alto mar per dritto segno;

[121] e questo fu il nostro patriarca;
per che qual segue lui, com' el comanda,
discerner puoi che buone merce carca.

[124] Ma 'l suo pecuglio di nova vivanda
è fatto ghiotto, sì ch'esser non puote
che per diversi salti non si spanda;

[127] e quanto le sue pecore remote
e vagabunde più da esso vanno,
più tornano a l'ovile di latte vòte.

[130] Ben son di quelle che temono 'l danno
e stringonsi al pastor; ma son sì poche,
che le cappe fornisce poco panno.

[133] Or, se le mie parole non son fioche,
se la tua audienza e stata attenta,
se ciò ch'è detto a la mente revoche,

[136] in parte fia la tua voglia contenta,
perché vedrai la pianta onde si scheggia,
e vedra' il corrègger che argomenta

[139] "U" ben s'impingua, se non si vaneggia".'

CANTO 11

[1] Those idiotic strivings of the human mind!
How flawed their arguments and logic are,
driving our wings to flap in downward flight.

[4] Some follow Law. Some drift (great tomes in hand)
to Medicine, others train in priestly craft.
Some rule by force, as others do by tricks.

[7] Some choose to steal, some trade in politics,
some toil, engrossed in pleasures of the flesh,
and others concentrate their minds on ease,

[10] while I, released from all that sort of thing,
was gathered up on high with Beatrice
in glorious triumph to the heavenly spheres.

[13] When each soul, dancing, had returned to that
position on the circle where it once had been,
all paused, like candles in a chandelier.

[16] And in that flare which spoke to me at first,
I, hearing, sensed these words begin, smiling
as in their brilliance they became more pure.

[19] ‘As I am here a mirror to the radiance
of everlasting light, so, looking back,
I grasp, in that, the wherefore of your thoughts.

[22] You have your doubts. You want me to define –
with sharper and more open explanations,
directed at your human ear – the words

[25] I uttered earlier: “Where all grow fat...”
and where I said: “No second ever rose.”
We need to make distinctions as to that.

[28] The providence that rules the universe,
in counsels so profound that all created
countenance will yield before it finds its depth,

[31] intended that the Bride of Christ (He wooed her
with His sacred blood, His cries raised high)
should go to her Belovèd in delight,

[34] sure of herself and truer still to Him,

and so ordained two princes that, on either side,
should walk along with her and be her guide.

[37]*The one was seraph-like in burning love,
the other in intelligence a splendour
on the earth that shone like Heaven's cherubim.

[40] I'll speak of one. For – take whichever man –
in prizing him, you'll praise the other, too.
Their different actions served a single plan.

[43]*Between the Tupin and the stream that runs
down from the hill that saintly Ubald chose,
a fertile slope hangs off that mountainside

[46] from which Perugia, through its Sun Gate, feels
both heat and chill. Behind that ridge, weeping,
are Nòcera and Gualdo, bowed by wind and shade.

[49] And where its swiftest incline crashes down,
another sun was born to light the world –
as our sun ranges, sometimes, from the Ganges.

[52]*Let those, inventing words to suit that place,
not voice "Assisi" as "Ascesi" or "Arisen"
(these words all want) but properly the "Orient".

[55] Nor was he far from his own rising dawn
when he began to make his country feel,
by his true powers, a certain strengthening.

[58] Headlong he ran – a callow boy – to war
and fought, against his father, for a girl
to whom – as though to death – all lock joy's door.

[61]*So, *coram patre* in the bishop's court,
he joined himself with her and, ever on,
from day to day he loved her all the more.

[64] She, sad and widowed of her first beloved,
remained a thousand years (and more) till he
came on to her – obscure, undated, scorned.

[67] Nor did it count to hear how Caesar – terror
of the world – had found her true, unwavering,
with Amyclas, not moved by his command.

[70] Nor did it count to hear that, likewise, she,
so fierce, so constant, wept (Mary herself

remained below) with Christ upon his Cross.

[73] But lest in what I say I prove unclear,
then understand, in all I've just poured out,
this loving pair are Francis and pure Poverty.

[76] The harmony, the looks of happiness
between these two, their tenderness and care,
their love, so wonderstruck, became the cause

[79]*of holy thoughts in Bernard (now revered),
the first who flung his shoes away and raced –
running, he thought himself too slow – for peace

[82] Such rampant goodness, riches yet untold!
Egidio flung his shoes away, Sylvester his,
chasing the groom, the bride so pleased them all.

[85] So off he goes, Saint Francis, father, lord.
His bride was Poverty, his family these –
their waists already bound with simple cord.

[88] Nor in abjection did it weigh his brows
to be Pietro Bernadone's kid,
nor when, amazingly, he faced disdain.

[91]*Rather, in sovereign manner he revealed
his stern intention to Pope Innocent,
who granted this devotion its first seal.

[94] And when his little pauper-company
had grown (the wonder of his life would sound
far more when sung in glory in the skies),

[97] this archimandrite in his holy will
was crowned now with a second diadem,
breathed by Eternal Spirit through Honorius.

[100]*Then after, thirsting for a martyr's fate,
he preached (before the Sultan's prideful throne)
his faith in Christ and all who followed him,

[103]*but found these people loath and far too sour
to change their ways. So, not to wait in vain,
he soon returned, to tend Italian vines.

[106] A rough crag splits the Arno's course from Tiber.
There Francis took from Christ the final seal,
and on his limbs for two years bore that sign.

[109] And when the one who'd dealt him so much good
was pleased to draw him up to that reward
which Francis earned through his great lowliness,

[112] he then bestowed his *donna*, held so dear,
on followers and brothers, his true heirs,
commanding them, in faith, to love her well.

[115] And from her bosom this illustrious soul
then chose to part, returning to his realm,
and chose no other bier for his own corpse.

[118] Think of the other now, what *he* was like
if fit to work with Francis and maintain
the Ship of Peter on its rightful track.

[121] Such was our patriarch, Saint Dominic.
And those who follow him as he commands
will bear, as you can tell, a precious freight.

[124] But now this pastor's flock turns ravenous
for weird new fodder, so they cannot fail
to scatter wide through many different leas.

[127] The further – wilful, wandering and wild –
his sheep desert him, so the emptier
they are of milk, returning to the fold.

[130] It's true that some are fearful of such harm,
huddling against their shepherd still. They're few.
There's not much cloth now needed for their cowls.

[133] Now if my words in meaning aren't too faint,
if you have been attentive, hearing them,
if you call what's been said to mind once more,

[136] in part what you desire will be content.
You'll see why that firm plant is torn to shreds,
and see the strict correction that contends:

[139] "Where all grow fat that do not go astray." '

Canto 12

[1] Sì tosto come l'ultima parola
la benedetta fiamma per dir tolse,
a rotar cominciò la santa mola;

[4] e nel suo giro tutta non si volse
prima ch'un'altra di cerchio la chiuse,
e moto a moto e canto a canto colse;

[7] canto che tanto vince nostre muse,
nostre serene in quelle dolci tube,
quanto primo splendor quel ch'e' refuse.

[10] Come si volgon per tenera nube
due archi paralleli e concolori,
quando Iunone a sua ancella iube,

[13] nascendo di quel d'entro quel di fori,
a guisa del parlar di quella vaga
ch'amor consunse come sol vapori,

[16] e fanno qui la gente esser presaga,
per lo patto che Dio con Noè puose,
del mondo che già mai più non s'allaga:

[19] così di quelle sempiterne rose
volgiensi circa noi le due ghirlande,
e sì l'estrema a l'intima rispuose.

[22] Poi che 'l tripudio e l'altra festa grande,
sì del cantare e sì del fiammeggiarsi
luce con luce gaudiose e blande,

[25] insieme a punto e a voler quietarsi,
pur come li occhi ch'al piacer che i move
conviene insieme chiudere e levarsi;

[28] del cor de l'una de le luci nove
si mosse voce, che l'ago a la stella
parer mi fece in volgermi al suo dove;

[31] e cominciò: 'L'amor che mi fa bella

mi tragge a ragionar de l'altro duca
per cui del mio sì ben ci si favella.

[34] Degno è che, dov' è l'un, l'altro s'induca:
sì che, com' elli ad una militaro,
così la gloria loro insieme luca.

[37] L'essercito di Cristo, che sì caro
costò a riarmar, dietro a la 'nsegna
si movea tardo, sospeccioso e raro,

[40] quando lo 'mperador che sempre regna
provide a la milizia, ch'era in forse,
per sola grazia, non per esser degna;

[43] e, come è detto, a sua sposa soccorse
con due campioni, al cui fare, al cui dire
lo popol disviato si raccorse.

[46] In quella parte ove surge ad aprire
Zefiro dolce le novelle fronde
di che si vede Europa rivestire,

[49] non molto lungi al percuoter de l'onde
dietro a le quali, per la lunga foga,
lo sol talvolta ad ogne uom si nasconde,

[52] siede la fortunata Calaroga
sotto la protezion del grande scudo
in che soggiace il leone e soggioga:

[55] dentro vi nacque l'amoroso drudo
de la fede cristiana, il santo atleta
enigno a' suoi e a' nemici crudo;

[58] e come fu creata, fu repleta
sì la sua mente di viva vertute
che, ne la madre, lei fece profeta.

[61] Poi che le sponsalizie fuor compiute
al sacro fonte intra lui e la Fede,
u' si dotar di mutua salute,

[64] la donna che per lui l'assenso diede,
vide nel sonno il mirabile frutto
ch'uscir dovea di lui e de le rede;

[67] e perché fosse qual era in costruito,
quinci si mosse spirito a nomarlo

del possessivo di cui era tutto.

[70] Domenico fu detto; e io ne parlo
sì come de l'agricola che Cristo
elesse a l'orto suo per aiutarlo.

[73] Ben parve messo e famigliar di Cristo:
che 'l primo amor che 'n lui fu manifesto,
fu al primo consiglio che die Cristo.

[76] Spesse fiate fu tacito e desto
trovato in terra da la sua nutrice,
come dicesse: "Io son venuto a questo."

[79] Oh padre suo veramente Felice!
oh madre sua veramente Giovanna,
se, interpretata, val come si dice!

[82] Non per lo mondo, per cui mo s'affanna
di retro ad Ostiense e a Taddeo,
ma per amor de la verace manna

[85] in picciol tempo gran dottor si feo;
tal che si mise a circuir la vigna
che tosto imbianca, se 'l vignaio è reo.

[88] E a la sedia che fu già benigna
più a' poveri giusti, non per lei,
ma per colui che siede, che traligna,

[91] non dispensare o due o tre per sei,
non la fortuna di prima vacante,
non *decimas, quae sunt pauperum Dei*,

[94] addimandò, ma contro al mondo errante
licenza di combatter per lo seme
del qual ti fascian ventiquattro piante.

[97] Poi, con dottrina e con volere insieme,
con l'ufficio apostolico si mosse
quasi torrente ch'alta vena preme;

[100] e ne li sterpi eretici percosse
l'impeto suo, più vivamente quivi
dove le resistenze eran più grosse.

[103] Di lui si fecer poi diversi rivi
onde l'orto catolico si riga,
sì che i suoi arbuscelli stan più vivi.

[106] Se tal fu l'una rota de la biga
in che la Santa Chiesa si difese
e vinse in campo la sua civil briga,

[109] ben ti dovrebbe assai esser palese
l'eccellenza de l'altra, di cui Tomma
dinanzi al mio venir fu sì cortese.

[112] Ma l'orbita che fé la parte somma
di sua circonferenza, é derelitta,
sì ch'è la muffa dov' era la gromma.

[115] La sua famiglia, che si mosse dritta
coi piedi a le sue orme, è tanto volta,
che quel dinanzi a quel di retro gitta;

[118] e tosto si vedrà de la ricolta
de la mala coltura, quando il loglio
si lagnerà che l'arca li sia tolta.

[121] Ben dico, chi cercasse a foglio a foglio
nostro volume, ancor troveria carta
u' leggerebbe "I' mi son quel ch'i' soglio";

[124] ma non fia da Casal né d'Acquasparta,
là onde vegnon tali a la scrittura,
ch'uno la fugge e altro la coarta.

[127] Io son la vita di Bonaventura
da Bagnoregio, che ne' grandi uffici
sempre pospuosi la sinistra cura.

[130] Illuminato e Augustin son quici,
che fuor de' primi scalzi poverelli
che nel capestro a Dio si fero amici.

[133] Ugo da San Vittore è qui con elli,
e Pietro Mangiadore e Pietro Spano,
lo qual giu luce in dodici libelli;

[136] Natàn profeta e 'l metropolitano
Crisostomo e Anselmo e quel Donato
ch'a la prim' arte degnò porre mano.

[139] Rabano è qui, e lucemi dallato
il calavrese abate Giovacchino
di spirito profetico dotato.

[142] Ad invegliar cotanto paladino

mi mosse l'infiammata cortesia
di fra Tommaso e 'l discreto latino;
[145] e mosse meco questa compagnia.'

CANTO 12

[1] The moment that this consecrated flame
had plucked the string to sound its final word,
he holy grinding stone began to wheel.

[4] Nor had it gone a whole rotation through
before a second circle closed around,
and coupled move to move and song with song –

[7] songs that defeat, in gentle trumpet calls,
our muses and all siren-songs as much
as primal splendour does its mirrored light.

[10] Compare: when haughty Juno bids her maid,
then double rainbows arch through fine-spun cloud,
concentric and the same in all their hues,

[13] the inner brings the outer into life
(as, too, the words, astray, entranced, of Echo,
whom love dispersed as sun consumes the mist)

[16] and these arcs show, for people here on earth,
as tokens of the pact God made with Noah
he world would never suffer flood again.

[19] So, too, these swirls of sempiternal rose
circled around us in their double band.
So too the outer answered that within.

[22] When once their galliard – their festal joy,
their singing and their flame-darts each to each,
light meeting light, wooing and rejoicing –

[25] all at one point, together in one will,
at last were quieted (as eyelids, too,
both moved by one delight, are closed and raised)

[28] then from the heart of one of these new lights
there moved a voice which made me turn to there,
it seemed, as needle to magnetic star.

[31] ‘The love that makes me lovely,’ this began,
‘draws me to speak about that other lord
whose aide has spoken here so well of mine.

[34] It’s right, where one is, that we name his peer,

for these two soldiered to a single end
and so their glorious triumphs shine as one.

[37] Christ's fighting force (so costly to re-arm)
was marching on beneath its battle sign,
but slow and watchful now, and much worn down.

[40] But then that Emperor who will always reign,
through grace alone and not through their desert,
provided for His soldiers, so perhaps-ed.

[43] He raced to aid His bride (as said before)
with two great heroes by whose words and deed
the people who had strayed came running back.

[46] Westward, in regions where mild Zephyrs rise –
to open out the fresh new foliage
with which all Europe sees itself reclothed –

[49] not far from where those breaking waves resound
beyond which, when the time comes round, the sun,
its long course over, sinks and hides from men,

[52] there stands, so blessed by fortune, Calaruega
protected by that great Castilian shield
which, quartered, bears the lion, high and low.

[55] And here, impassioned by the Christian faith,
the love-sick knight was born, a champion,
kind to his own, but harsh to enemies.

[58]*-And mind in him no sooner took on form
than mind was filled so full of living strength
he made, while still enwombed, his mother prophesy.

[61] Then wedded, at the well of baptism,
to Faith (where Faith and he, as marriage gift,
each vowed salvation mutually to each),

[64] the lady speaking as his sponsor there
saw in a dream the fruit to wonder at
that he and his inheritors would bear.

[67] And so that all he was might show in words,
a spirit moved from Heaven to form his name –
the adjective of whose he wholly was.

[70] They called him Dominic. I speak of him
as farmer – called and singled out by Christ,

to work His orchard and to help it thrive.

[73] He seemed one sent, in truth, to follow Christ.
The first love that was manifest in him
obeyed the first command that came from Christ.

[76] And many times his nurse discovered him,
awake, unspeaking, stretched out on the ground,
as though he meant to say: “For this I came.”

[79] Felix, O truly happy, his father!
O truly blessed, his mother Giovanna –
her name in Hebrew, rightly read, means “grace”.

[82] Not craving worldly wealth (like those who ape
the Ostian lawyer or a Doctor Tad)
but loving, purely, manna of God’s truth,

[85] he soon became a scholar of great worth,
and hence determined to patrol those vines
that white-rot strikes when growers are no good.

[88] Before the papal throne – more generous once
(not now) to poor, true hearts, grown so diseased
through his fault reigning now, and not its own –

[91]*he sought no leave to pay mere halves and thirds,
no first shot at some well-paid vacancy,
no tax rebated *quae sunt pauperes*,

[94]*rather, against a world of wilful lies,
licence to battle for the seed of truth,
hose saplings – twenty-four – here bind you round.

[97] And then he moved with learning and with zeal,
as also with his mandate from the pope,
like some fierce torrent surging down a hill.

[100] And at the thicket of the heretics
he struck with all his impetus,
the stronger where resistance was the worse.

[103] Then many streams were formed within his wake
to irrigate the orchard of the Church
and keep the shrubs there growing better still.

[106] Take this to be the chariot’s second wheel,
mounted by Holy Church, in self-defence
to drive all civil nuisance from the field.

[109] And then you'll see laid plain before your eyes
how excellent the other is – to whom,
before I came, Saint Thomas was so courteous.

[112] The track, however, that the wheel-tread leaves
has gone all wrong at its circumference.
Where once the wine-crust crisped, it's musty now.

[115] His retinue – which once, in his own prints,
trod straight and true – has done a turn-about.
So toes now spring where once the heels had been.

[118] And soon we'll see what crops bad farming yields,
when tares and weeds, complaining, will all whine,
being denied safe storage in the barn.

[121] Granted, whoever browsed through, page by page,
our master-roll would find there still and read:
“I in myself am what I always was.”

[124] But not the Acquaspartan or the Casalese.
For these are such as either flee, or take
too strictly, text and rule *ad litteram*.

[127] I am the living heart of Bonaventure –
Bagnoregensian. In public works
I set aside all underhand concerns.

[130]*The first who joined our barefoot band, and twined
he cord, as friends to God, around their waists,
re here – Illuminato, Agostino, too.

[133] Along with them is Hugo of Saint Victor,
Peter of Spain – who glitters there below
in twelve fine tomes – and Peter Mangiador,

[136] Nathan the Seer, the Bishop Metropolitan
Chrysostom, Anselm and Donatus next,
who set his hand to write the grammar rules.

[139] Raban is here and, shining by my side,
Dom Joachim, Calabrian by birth,
endowed with all his gifts of prophecy.

[142] To praise (and envy!) of Count Dominic
I'm moved by that same burning courtesy
of Brother Thomas and his well-judged words,

[145] which moved this company along with me.'

Canto 13

[1] Imagini, chi bene intender cupe
quel ch'i' or vidi – e ritegna l'image,
mentre ch'io dico, come ferma rupe –,

[4] quindici stelle che 'n diverse plage
lo ciel avvivan di tanto sereno
the soperchia de l'aere ogne compage;

[7] imagini quel carro a cu' il seno
basta del nostro cielo e notte e giorno,
sì ch'al volger del temo non vien meno;

[10] imagini la bocca di quel corno
che si comincia in punta de lo stelo
a cui la prima rota va dintorno,

[13] aver fatto di sè due segni in cielo,
qual fece la figliuola di Minoi
llora che sentì di morte il gelo;

[16] e l'un ne l'altro aver li raggi suoi,
e amendue girarsi per maniera
che l'uno andasse al primo e l'altro al poi;

[19] e avrà quasi l'ombra de la vera
costellazione e de la doppia danza
che circolava il punto dov' io era:

[22] poi ch'è tanto di là da nostra usanza,
quanto di là dal mover de la Chiana
si move il ciel che tutti li altri avanza.

[25] Lì si cantò non Bacco, non Peana,
ma tre persone in divina natura,
e in una persona essa e l'umana.

[28] Compie 'l cantare e 'l volger sua misura;
e attesersi a noi quei santi lumi,
felicitando sé di cura in cura.

[31] Ruppe il silenzio ne' concordi numi

poscia la luce in che mirabil vita
del poverel di Dio narrata fumi,

[34] e disse: 'Quando l'una paglia è trita,
quando la sua semenza è già riposta,
a batter l'altra dolce amor m'invita.

[37] Tu credi che nel petto onde la costa
si trasse per formar la bella guancia
il cui palato a tutto 'l mondo costa,

[40] e in quel che, forato da la lancia,
e prima e poscia tanto sodisfece,
che d'ogne colpa vince la bilancia,

[43] quantunque a la natura umana lece
aver di lume, tutto fosse infuso
da quel valor che l'uno e l'altro fece;

[46] e però miri a ciò ch'io dissi suso,
quando narrai che non ebbe 'l secondo
lo ben che ne la quinta luce è chiuso.

[49] Or apri li occhi a quel ch'io ti rispondo,
e vedrai il tuo credere e 'l mio dire
nel vero farsi come centro in tondo.

[52] Ciò che non more e ciò che pud morire
non è se non splendor di quella idea
che partorisce, amando, il nostro Sire;

[55] ché quella viva luce che sì mea
dal suo lucente, che non si disuna
da lui né da l'amor ch'a lor s'intrea,

[58] per sua bontate il suo raggiare aduna,
quasi specchiato, in nove sussistenze,
eternalmente rimanendosi una.

[61] Quindi discende a l'ultime potenze
giù d'atto in atto, tanto divenendo,
che più non fa che brevi contingenze;

[64] e queste contingenze essere intendo
le cose generate, che produce
con seme e senza seme il ciel movendo.

[67] La cera di costoro e chi la duce
non sta d'un modo; e però sotto 'l segno

ideale poi più e men traluce.

[70] Ond' elli avvien ch'un medesimo legno,
secondo specie, meglio e peggio frutta;
e voi nascete con diverso ingegno.

[73] Se fosse a punto la cera dedutta
e fosse il cielo in sua virtù suprema,
la luce del suggel parrebbe tutta;

[76] ma la natura la dà sempre scema,
similmente operando a l'artista
ch'a l'abito de l'arte ha man che trema.

[79] Però se 'l caldo amor la chiara vista
de la prima virtù dispone e segna,
tutta la perfezion quivi s'acquista.

[82] Così fu fatta già la terra degna
di tutta l'animal perfezione;
così fu fatta la Vergine pregna;

[85] sì ch'io commendo tua oppinione,
che l'umana natura mai non fue
nè fia qual fu in quelle due persone.

[88] Or s'i' non procedesse avanti piùè,
“Dunque, come costui fu senza pare?”
comincerebber le parole tue.

[91] Ma perché paia ben ciò che non pare,
pensa chi era, e la cagion che 'l mosse,
quando fu detto “Chiedi”, a dimandare.

[94] Non ho parlato sì, che tu non posse
ben veder ch'el fu re, che chiese senno
acciò che re sufficiente fosse;

[97] non per sapere il numero in che enno
li motor di qua sù, o se *necesse*
con contingente mai *necesse* fenno;

[100] non *si est dare primutn motutn esse*,
o se del mezzo cerchio far si puote
triangol sì ch'un retto non avesse.

[103] Onde, se ciò ch'io dissi e questo note,
regal prudenza è quel vedere impari
in che lo stral di mia intenzion percuote;

[106] e se al “surse” drizzi li occhi chiari,
vedrai aver solamente rispetto
ai regi, che son molti, e ’ buon son rari.

[109] Con questa distinzion prendi ’l mio detto;
e così puote star con quel che credi
del primo padre e del nostro Diletto.

[112] E questo ti sia sempre piombo a’ piedi,
per farti mover lento com’ uom lasso
e al sì e al no che tu non vedi:

[115] ché quelli è tra li stolti bene a basso,
che senza distinzione afferma e nega
ne l’un così come ne l’altro passo;

[118] perch’ elli ’ncontra che più volte piega
l’opinion corrente in falsa parte,
e poi l’affetto l’intelletto lega.

[121] Vie più che ’ndarno da riva si parte,
perchè non torna tal qual e’ si move,
chi pesca per lo vero e non ha l’arte.

[124] E di ciò sono al mondo aperte prove
Parmenide, Melisso e Brisso e molti,
li quali andaro e non sapean dove;

[127] sì fé Sabellio e Arrio e quelli stolti
che furon come spade a le Scritture
in render torti li diritti volti.

[130] Non sien le genti, ancor, troppo sicure
a giudicar, sì come quei che stima
le biade in campo pria che sien mature;

[133] ch’i’ ho veduto tutto ’l verno prima
lo prun mostrarsi rigido e feroce,
poscia portar la rosa in sù la cima;

[136] e legno vidi già dritto e veloce
correr lo mar per tutto suo cammino,
perire al fine a l’intrar de la foce.

[139] Non creda donna Berta e ser Martino,
per vedere un furare, altro offerere,
vederli dentro al consiglio divino;

[142] ché quel può surgere, e quel può cadere.’

CANTO 13

[1]*Imagine, if you truly want to know
what I saw now – and while I’m speaking grip
his image firm, as though a steady rock –

[4] some fifteen stars, from various demesnes,
that bring the heavens to life with light so clear
they overcome the thickest weave of air.

[7] Imagine, too, the Wain which needs, by day or night,
no arc more ample than our lap of sky –
its turning plough shaft never lost to view.

[10] Imagine, too, the bell mouth of the Horn,
its point beginning at the axle end
round which the wheel that starts the cosmos rolls.

[13] Imagine these all forming, in the sky,
two signs among themselves (as when the child
of Minos, Ariadne, felt death’s chill)

[16] so that the rays of one contained the next
and each was now revolving differently,
one set in this direction, one in that,

[19] you’ll have a shade, then, almost, of that true
constellation – of the dance that, doubled,
circled around the point where I was now.

[22]*That goes as far beyond the norms we know
as does that sphere which outruns all the rest
beyond the sluggish current of Chiana.

[25]*Those songs there praised not Bacchus nor Peana.
They sang three persons all divine in kind,
and in one person human and divine.

[28] The singing done, the measured round complete,
these holy lights stretched out their thought to us,
rejoicing in themselves at this new care.

[31] The silence, then, of these concordant powers
was broken by that light in whom I’d heard
the story told of God’s dear down-and-out.

[34] ‘When once,’ he said, ‘one crop of straw is threshed,

and once the grain from that is gathered in,
then love calls gently that I flail the next.

[37] Your view is this, that, firstly, in that breast
from which a living rib was drawn to make
Eve's lovely cheek (her taste once cost us all),

[40] and then in Him – His side pierced by the lance –
who paid full satisfaction, first and last,
and so outweighed the scales of guilt and sin,

[43] were poured infusions of the greatest light
that we in human nature rightly have,
drawn from that Worth that first made these two men.

[46] Thinking all this, you wonder at my tale
when I declare: "No second ever rose"
to match the good enclosed in that fifth light.

[49] Now clear your eyes to what my answer is.
Then what you think and what I say, agree,
you'll find, in truth, as circles round one point.

[52] Those things that cannot die and those that can
are nothing save the splendours of that One
Idea that, loving, brought our Lord to birth.

[55] For Living Light, which, from the Fount of Light,
cascades in ways that do not disunite it,
from Him or from the Love en-three-ing them,

[58] in generosity collects its rays,
as mirrored in nine ranks of life anew,
itself eternally remaining One.

[61] Down to the outermost of what can be,
from act to act descending, it becomes
maker of, merely, brief contingencies.

[64] And, here, by "brief contingencies" I mean
those things produced – in seed or mineral –
by generative influence of moving spheres.

[67] The wax of these – as, too, the hand that guides –
is never steady in some single mode,
but gleams, here more, here less, beneath the ideal sign.

[70] It happens, therefore, that the self-same wood
bears, in its species, better fruit or worse.

So humans, too, are born with different gifts.

[73] And were that wax point-perfectly embossed,
and were the heavens at the height of power,
the light of that first seal would show in full.

[76] Yet Nature, as created, falls far short.
It operates as any craftsman will
who knows his trade and yet has trembling hands.

[79] If Love, though, in its fervent warmth arrays
and prints the clear regard of Primal power,
entire perfection will be here acquired.

[82] The earth was once made worthy in this way
of all that creatures perfectly may be.
So, too, the Virgin was made big with child.

[85] I do, therefore, commend the view you take,
that human nature never was before,
nor was to be, as, once, in these two men.

[88] But now suppose I did not follow on,
“How is it, then, that he can have no peer?”
these are the words that you’d begin to speak.

[91] And yet to clarify what is not clear,
think who this was, and what – when “Ask!” was said –
moved him, in prayer, to ask as he then did.

[94] My words have not been such that you can’t see
this man was once a king who simply asked
for wisdom to fulfill his kingly role,

[97]*and not to know how many astral drives
there are up there or whether, logically,
necesse and contingents prove *necesse*,

[100] or *si est dare primum motutn esse*
or if half-circles can contain a shape
that is a triangle but not a “right”.

[103] It follows, if you note all I have said,
that what I meant my arrow-shot to strike
is kingly wisdom, matchless mode of sight.

[106] And if you look, clear-eyed, on that word “rose”,
you’ll see the phrase applies to kings alone –
so many, yet so few who’re any good.

[109] So, hearing what I say, make that distinction,
and all will stand at one with what you hold,
as to our father Adam and our best Beloved.

[112] And let this be a lead weight on your feet,
so that you move as slow as if worn out
to any “yes” or “no” unclear to you.

[115] For no fool is as low a fool as one
who taking either of these steps will fail
affirming or denying in distinction.

[118] So often when our judgement rushes on,
it happens that we veer in false directions
and then emotions bind the intellect.

[121] In fishing for the truth without that skill,
it's worse than useless to cast off from shore.
You'll not return the same as you set out.

[124]*And patent proof of this throughout the world
are Bryson and Parmenides, Melissus and all,
who went their way not knowing where they went,

[127]*as Arius did, Sabellius, too, and all those fools
whose heresies have gashed the Holy Word,
returning from its rightful gaze sheer wrong.

[130] And then again, don't let folk be too sure
in passing judgement as do those who price
the harvest in the field before it's ripe.

[133] For I have seen, at first, all winter through
a thorn bush shows itself as stark and fierce,
which after bears a rose upon its height.

[136] And I have seen a keel, steered swift and well,
speed over oceans all its voyage through,
then perish at the entrance to the dock.

[139]*And so when Mrs Smith and Mr Jones
see one man steal, another offer alms,
don't let them think they see this in God's plan.

[142] The thief may rise, the other take a fall.'

Canto 14

[1] Dal centro al cerchio, e sì dal cerchio al centro
movesi l'acqua in un ritondo vaso,
secondo ch'è percosso fuori o dentro:

[4] ne la mia mente fé sùbito caso
questo ch'io dico, sì come sì tacque
la gloriosa vita di Tommaso,

[7] per la similitudine che nacque
del suo parlare e di quel di Beatrice,
a cui sì cominciar, dopo lui, piacque:

[10] 'A costui fa mestieri, e nol vi dice
né con la voce né pensando ancora,
d'un altro vero andare a la radice.

[13] Diteli se la luce onde s'infiora
vostra sustanza, rimarrà con voi
etternalmente sì com' ell' è ora;

[16] e se rimane, dite come, poi
che sarete visibili rifatti,
esser porà ch'al veder non vi nòi.'

[19] Come, da più letizia pinti e tratti,
a la fiata quei che vanno a rota
levan la voce e rallegrano li atti,

[22] così, a l'orazion pronta e divota,
li santi cerchi mostrar nova gioia
nel torneare e ne la mira nota.

[25] Qual si lamenta perché qui si moia
per viver colà sù, non vide quive
lo refrigerio de l'eterna ploia.

[28] Quell' uno e due e tre che sempre vive
e regna sempre in tre e 'n due e 'n uno,
non circunscriitto, e tutto circunscrive,

[31] tre volte era cantato da ciascuno

di quelli spirti con tal melodia,
ch'ad ogni merto saria giusto muno.

[34] E io udi' ne la luce più dia
del minor cerchio una voce modesta,
forse qual fu da l'angelo a Maria,

[37] risponder: 'Quanto fia lunga la festa
di paradiso, tanto il nostro amore
si raggerà dintorno cotal vesta.

[40] La sua chiarezza sèguita l'ardore;
l'ardor la visione, e quella è tanta,
quant' ha di grazia sovra suo valore.

[43] Come la carne gloriosa e santa
fia rivestita, la nostra persona
più grata fia per esser tutta quanta;

[46] per che s'accrescerà ciò che ne dona
di gratuito lume il sommo bene,
lume ch'a lui veder ne condiziona;

[49] onde la vision crescer convene,
crescer l'ardor che di quella s'accende,
crescer lo raggio che da esso vene.

[52] Ma sì come carbon che fiamma rende,
e per vivo candor quella soverchia,
sì che la sua parvenza si difende;

[55] così questo folgór che già ne cerchia
fia vinto in apparenza da la carne
che tutto dî la terra ricoperchia;

[58] né potrà tanta luce affaticarne:
ché li organi del corpo saran forti
a tutto ciò che potrà dilettarne.'

[61] Tanto mi parver sùbiti e accorti
e l'uno e l'altro coro a dicer 'Ammè!'
che ben mostrar disio d'i corpi morti:

[64] forse non pur per lor, ma per le mamme,
per li padri e per li altri che fuor cari
anzi che fosser sempiterne fiamme.

[67] Ed ecco intorno, di chiarezza pari,
nascere un lustro sopra quel che v'era,

per guisa d'orizzonte che rischiari.

[70] E sì come al salir di prima sera
comincian per lo ciel nove parvenze,
sì che la vista pare e non par vera,

[73] parvemi lì novelle sussistenze
cominciare a vedere, e fare un giro
di fuor da l'altre due circonferenze.

[76] Oh vero sfavillar del Santo Spiro!
come si fece sùbito e candente
a li occhi miei che, vinti, nol soffriro!

[79] Ma Beatrice sì bella e ridente
mi si mostrò, che tra quelle vedute
si vuol lasciar che non seguir la mente.

[82] Quindi ripreser li occhi miei virtute
a rilevarsi; e vidimi translato
sol con mia donna in più alta salute.

[85] Ben m'accors' io ch'io era più levato,
per l'affocato riso de la Stella,
che mi pareva più roggio che l'usato.

[88] Con tutto 'l core e con quella favella
ch'è una in tutti, a Dio feci olocausto,
qual conveniesi a la grazia novella.

[91] E non er' anco del mio petto essausto
l'ardor del sacrificio, ch'io conobbi
esso litare stato accetto e fausto;

[94] chè con tanto luore e tanto robbi
m'apparvero splendor dentro a due raggi,
ch'io dissi: 'O Eliòs che sì li addobbi!'

[97] Come distinta da minori e maggi
lumi biancheggia tra 'poli del mondo
Galassia sì, che fa dubbiar ben saggi;

[100] sì costellati facean nel profondo
Marte quei raggi il venerabil segno
che fan giunture di quadranti in tondo.

[103] Qui vince la memoria mia lo 'ngegno;
ché quella croce lampeggiava Cristo,
sì ch'io non so trovare essempro degno;

[106] ma chi prende sua croce e segue Cristo,
ancor mi scuserà di quel ch'io lasso,
vedendo in quell' albor balenar Cristo.

[109] Di corno in corno e tra la cima e 'l basso
si movien lumi, scintillando forte
nel congiugnersi insieme e nel trapasso:

[112] così si veggion qui diritte e torte,
veloci e tarde, rinnovando vista,
le minuzie d'i corpi, lunghe e corte,

[115] moversi per lo raggio onde si lista
talvolta l'ombra che, per sua difesa,
la gente con ingegno e arte acquista.

[118] E come giga e arpa, in temprata tesa
di molte corde, fa dolce tintinno
a tal da cui la nota non è intesa,

[121] così da' lumi che lì m'apparinno
s'accogliea per la croce una melode
che mi rapiva, senza intender l'inno.

[124] Ben m'accors' io ch'elli era d'alte lode,
però ch'a me venìa 'Resurgi' e 'Vinci'
come a colui che non intende e ode.

[127] Io m'innamorava tanto quinci,
che 'nfino a lì non fu alcuna cosa
che mi legasse con sì dolci vinci.

[130] Forse la mia parola par troppo osa,
posponendo il piacer de li occhi belli,
ne' quai mirando mio disio ha posa;

[133] ma chi s'awede che i vivi suggelli
d'ogne bellezza più fanno più suso,
e ch'io non m'era lì rivolto a quelli,

[136] escusar puommi di quel ch'io m'accuso
per escusarmi, e vedermi dir vero:
ché 'l piacer santo non è qui dischiuso,

[139] perché si fa, montando, più sincero.

CANTO 14

[1] Centre to circle or circle to centre:
water in a round container moves like that,
depending where the rim is struck, inside or out.

[4] I utter here the instant thought that chanced
across my mind when now, in all its glory,
the life of Thomas Aquinas fell silent,

[7] born from a close resemblance that arose
between his words and these that, after him,
were voiced by Beatrice. She began:

[10] ‘This man still needs – although he does not say,
nor is he even thinking it as yet –
to trace another truth down to its root.

[13] Tell him: that light in which, as what you are,
your being in its substance is in-flowered,
will that remain eternally with you?

[16] And if it does remain, then tell him how,
when once you are remade as visibles,
it cannot spoil your eyesight, being so.’

[19] Compare: as dancers – wheeling, drawn and pressed
by keener happiness at certain points –
exult in voice, their gestures quickening,

[22] so now, to hear her prompt, devoted prayer,
the holy circles showed new joy, in turns
of flashing speed and notes to wonder at.

[25] Whoever mourns to think we here must die,
to live our lives up there, has never seen
the cool refreshment of the eternal shower.

[28] The one and two and three who always lives
and always reign in three and two and one,
uncircumscribed and circumscribing all,

[31] had, three times now, been lauded in the songs
of every spirit there, the melody
a condign prize, however great the worth.

[34] Then, in the holiest of lights among

the lesser ring, I heard a voice (as modest
as, maybe, the angel's to Maria),

[37] answering: 'As long as this great festival
of Paradise goes on, so, too, our love
will cast these robes in rays around us all.

[40] That brightness follows from their inward fire,
that fire from vision. And their sight extends
as far as each, beyond their due, has grace.

[43] But when the glorious and sacred flesh
is clothing us once more, our person then
will be – complete and whole – more pleasing still.

[46] For then whatever has been granted us,
by utmost good, of free and gracious light
(the light through which we see Him) will increase.

[49] Hence, as must be, our seeing will increase,
increasing, too, the fire that vision lights,
the ray increasing that proceeds from that.

[52] But just as burning coal may give out flames,
yet overcome these with its own white light,
keeping, within, its shape and semblance whole,

[55] so, too, the shining-out that rings us round
will, in appearance, be surpassed by flesh
which all day long the earth now covers up.

[58] Nor can it be that so much light will tire.
Our organs, physically, will have the strength
for every pleasure that can come to us.'

[61] So ready and alert they seemed to me –
those double choirs – to add their plain 'Amen'
they showed their keen desire for long dead bones,

[64] not only for themselves but for their mums,
their fathers, too, and others dear to them,
before they were these sempiternal flames.

[67] Look! Round those circles, matched in clarity,
a lustre, more than what was there, was born,
as though a new horizon, brightening.

[70] When early evening hours are drawing in,
new things begin to show across the sky

so that the sight both seems and seems not true.

[73] There, too, it seemed to me that newer things
began to rise to view and form a ring
beyond the circumscription of those two.

[76] True spark shower flying from the Holy Breath!
How suddenly it flared, how incandescent!
My eyes, defeated, could not bear the sight.

[79] But Beatrice showed herself to me –
laughing, so beautiful she must be left
among things seen that memory can't pursue.

[82] And so my eyes, regaining their right strength,
lifted once more. I saw myself alone,
borne with my lady to a higher good.

[85] Seeing the flares of laughter in that star,
which seemed now far more fiery than before,
I knew full well that I'd been lifted higher.

[88] With all my heart and with that tongue – flaming
alike in all our thoughts – aflame, I made to God
burnt offerings that befitted this new grace.

[91] Nor had the ardour of that sacrifice
been drained still from my heart before it was,
I knew, propitious and acceptable.

[94] For shining so – a ruby in its hue –
splendour appeared to me in two crossed rays.
'Eliosun!' I said. 'You grant this accolade.'

[97] The galaxy, distinctly marked by lights,
both great and small, between the earth's two poles,
glistens and makes the learned wonder why.

[100] So too, like constellations in the depths
of Mars, these rays composed the honoured sign
that quadrants (joined within a circle) form.

[103] And here remembering surpasses skill:
that cross, in sudden flaring, blazed out Christ
so I can find no fit comparison.

[106] But those who take their cross and follow Christ
will let me off where, wearily, I fail,
seeing in that white dawn, as lightning, Christ.

[109] From horn to horn, from summit down to base,
there moved here scintillating points of light,
bright as their paths met, bright in passing on.

[112] So minute specks of matter can be seen –
renewing how they look at every glance,
straight in their track, oblique, long, short, swift, slow –

[115] moving through sunbeams that will sometimes streak
the shade that people, to protect themselves,
have won through their intelligence or art.

[118] As harp or viol – in tempered harmony,
their many strings stretched tight – still ring and sing,
even to those who do not catch the tune,

[121] so, though I did not understand their hymn,
an air now gathered that enraptured me
from lights appearing there throughout the cross.

[124] I realized full well it sang high praise
for, as to one who does not understand
yet hears, there came to me, ‘Rise up!’ and ‘Win!’

[127] At which, I sank so deep in love of this
that never till that time had anything
entrammelled me in such delightful bonds.

[130] These words of mine may seem perhaps too bold,
slighting the pleasure of those lovely eyes,
in which, when gazing, my desires all rest.

[133] Whoever thinks, though, that the living prints
of every beauty grow the more they rise,
and notices I did not turn to these,

[136] will make excuse for what I here confess
to win excuse, and see me speak the truth.
Holy delight is not excluded here.

[139] Rather, in rising it will grow more pure.

Canto 15

[1] Benigna voluntade in che si liqua
sempre l'amor che drittamente spira,
come cupidità fa ne la iniqua,

[4] silenzio puose a quella dolce lira,
e fece quietar le sante corde
che la destra del cielo allenta e tira.

[7] Come saranno a' giusti preghi sorde
quelle sustanze che, per darmi voglia
ch'io le pregassi, a tacer fur concorde?

[10] Bene è che senza termine si doglia
chi, per amor di cosa che non duri
etternalmente, quello amor si spoglia.

[13] Quale per li seren tranquilli e puri
discorre ad ora ad or sùbito foco,
movendo li occhi che stavan sicuri,

[16] e pare stella che tramuti loco,
se non che da la parte ond' e' s'accende
nulla sen perde, ed esso dura poco:

[19] tale dal corno che 'n destro si stende
a piè di quella croce corse un astro
de la costellazion che lì resplende;

[22] né sì partì la gemma dal suo nastro,
ma per la lista radial trascorse,
che parve foco dietro ad alabastro.

[25] Sì pia l'ombra d'Anchise si porse,
se fede merta nostra maggior musa,
quando in Eliso del figlio s'accorse.

[28] *'O sanguis meus, o superinfusa
gratia Dei, sicut tibi cui
bis unquam celi ianua reclusa?'*

[31] Così quel lume: ond' io m'attesi a lui;

poscia rivolsi a la mia donna il viso,
e quindi e quindi stupefatto fui;

[34] chè dentro a li occhi suoi ardeva un riso
tal, ch'io pensai co' miei toccar lo fondo
de la mia gloria e del mio paradiso.

[37] Indi, a udire e a veder giocondo,
giunse lo spirto al suo principio cose,
ch'io non lo 'ntesi, sì parlò profondo;

[40] né per elezion mi si nascose,
ma per necessità, ché 'l suo concetto
al segno d'i mortal si soprapuose.

[43] E quando l'arco de l'ardente affetto
fu sì sfogato, che 'l parlar discese
inver' lo segno del nostro intelletto,

[46] la prima cosa che per me s'intese,
'Benedetto sia tu', fu, 'trino e uno,
che nel mio seme se' tanto cortese!'

[49] E seguì: 'Grato e lontano digiuno,
tratto leggendo del magno volume
du' non si muta mai bianco né bruno,

[52] solvuto hai, figlio, dentro a questo lume
in ch'io ti parlo, mercè di colei
ch'a l'alto volo ti vestì le piume.

[55] Tu credi che a me tuo pensier mei
da quel ch'è primo, così come raia
da l'un, se si conosce, il cinque e 'l sei;

[58] e però ch'io mi sia e perch' io paia
più gaudioso a te, non mi domandi,
che alcun altro in questa turba gaia.

[61] Tu credi 'l vero; ché i minori e ' grandi
di questa vita miran ne lo specchio
in che, prima che pensi, il pensier pandi;

[64] ma perché 'l sacro amore in che io veglio
con perpetua vista e che m'assetta
di dolce disiar, s'adempia meglio,

[67] la voce tua sicura, balda e lieta
suoni la volontà, suoni 'l disio,

a che la mia risposta è già decreta!’

[70] Io mi volsi a Beatrice, e quella udio
pria ch’io parlassi, e arrisemi un cenno
che fece crescer l’ali al voler mio.

[73] Poi cominciai così: ‘L’affetto e ’l senno,
come la prima equalità v’apparse,
d’un peso per ciascun di voi si fenno,

[76] però che ’l sol che v’allumò e arse,
col caldo e con la luce è sì iguali,
che tutte simiglianze sono scarse.

[79] Ma voglia e argomento ne’ mortali,
per la cagion ch’a voi è manifesta,
diversamente son pennuti in ali;

[82] ond’ io, che son mortal, mi sento in questa
disagguaglianza, e però non ringrazio
se non col core a la paterna festa.

[85] Ben supplico io a te, vivo topazio
che questa gioia preziosa ingemmi,
perché mi facci del tuo nome sazio.’

[88] ‘O fronda mia in che io compiacemmi
pur aspettando, io fui la tua radice’:
cotal principio, rispondendo, femmi.

[91] Poscia mi disse: ‘Quel da cui si dice
tua cognazione e che cent’ anni e piùè
girato ha ’l monte in la prima cornice,

[94] mio figlio fu e tuo bisavol fue:
ben si convien che la lunga fatica
tu li raccorci con l’opere tue.

[97] Fiorenza dentro da la cerchia antica,
ond’ ella toglie ancora e terza e nona,
si stava in pace, sobria e pudica.

[100] Non avea catenella, non corona,
non gonne contigiate, non cintura
che fosse a veder più che la persona.

[103] Non faceva, nascendo, ancor paura
la figlia al padre, che ’l tempo e la dote
non fuggien quinci e quindi la misura.

[106] Non avea case di famiglia vòte;
non v'era giunto ancor Sardanapalo
a mostrar ciò che 'n camera si puote.

[109] Non era vinto ancora Montemalo
dal vostro Uccellatoio, che, com' è vinto
nel montar sù, così sarà nel calo.

[112] Bellincion Berti vid' io andar cinto
di cuoio e d'osso, e venir da lo specchio
la donna sua senza 'l viso dipinto;

[115] e vidi quel d'i Nerli e quel del Vecchio
esser contenti a la pelle scoperta,
e le sue donne al fuso e al penneccchio.

[118] Oh fortunate! ciascuna era certa
de la sua sepultura, e ancor nulla
era per Francia nel letto diserta.

[121] L'una vegghiava a studio de la culla,
e, consolando, usava l'idioma
che prima i padri e le madri trastulla;

[124] l'altra, traendo a la rocca la chioma,
favoleggiava con la sua famiglia
d'i Troiani, di Fiesole e di Roma.

[127] Saria tenuta allor tal maraviglia
una Cianghella, un Lapo Salterello,
qual or saria Cincinnato e Corniglia.

[130] A così riposato, a così bello
viver di cittadini, a così fida
cittadinanza, a così dolce ostello,

[133] Maria mi diè, chiamata in alte grida;
e ne l'antico vostro Batisteo
insieme fui cristiano e Cacciaguida.

[136] Moronto fu mio frate ed Eliseo;
mia donna venne a me di val di Pado,
e quindi il soprannome tuo si feo.

[139] Poi seguitai lo 'mperador Currado;
ed el mi cinse de la sua milizia,
tanto per bene ovrar li venni in grado.

[142] Dietro li andai incontro a la nequizia

di quella legge il cui popolo usurpa,
per colpa d'i pastor, vostra giustizia.

[145] Quivi fu' io da quella gente turpa
disviluppato dal mondo fallace,
lo cui amor molt' anime deturpa;

[148] e venni dal martiro a questa pace.'

CANTO 15

[1] Good will (to which the love that breathes aright
will always in its distillation flow,
as does cupidity to wickedness)

[4] brought silence to that sweetly sounding lyre,
and stilled the motion of its holy strings,
which Heaven's right hand both plucks and modulates.

[7] How can it be that those true beings there
whose choir of silence urged me on to pray
will ever turn deaf ears to honest prayer?

[10] It's only right that all know endless grief
who, loving only things that can't endure,
steal from themselves, eternally, true love.

[13] Sometimes, across a pure, untroubled sky,
there runs an instantaneous flash of fire,
moving our steady eyes to trace its course,

[16] from which, it seems, a star is changing place,
except that, at the point it caught alight,
nothing is lost, nor does it last for long.

[19] So, from the right extension of the cross
down to its foot, there ran an astral spark
which left the constellation shining there.

[22] Nor did that gem stone leave its bezelled rim,
but ran a length along the radial beam,
as fire behind some alabaster screen.

[25] So, too, the shadow of Anchises showed
(if we give credence to our greatest muse),
seeing his son approach him in Elysium.

[28]**'O sanguis tneus, o superinfusa
gratia Dei, sicut tibi cui
bis unquam celi ianua reclusa?'*

[31] The light spoke thus. I gave my mind to him,
then turned to see my lady's countenance,
amazed at what I saw on either side.

[34] For laughter in her eyes now burned so bright

that, as I thought, I touched the very depths
of all I gloried in – and Paradise.

[37] Then, full of joy, in hearing as in sight,
the spirit added to those opening words,
which I'd not understood – he spoke so deep –

[40] though he'd not hidden from me out of choice,
but rather of necessity, his thought
so set itself above our mortal mark.

[43] And when the bow shot of his burning love
had so far settled that his speech came down
to reach the target of our intellect,

[46] the first thing that I came to understand
was: 'Blessèd be Thou, the Triune and the One
who's graced my seed with so much courtesy.'

[49] He then went on: 'My son, a long, glad fast –
drawn out in reading from the noble book
where there can be no change of white and black –

[52] you now relieve me of, within this light
from which I speak. All thanks be hers
who clothes you in the wings for this great flight.

[55] You think that all your thoughts come down to me
from that which is the First – as five and six
come forth as rays, if clearly seen, from one.

[58] And therefore why, myself, I am and seem
to you more jubilant than others here
who form this happy throng, you don't inquire.

[61] You think the truth. Within this rank of life,
the greatest and the least all gaze upon
the glass where thought, before you think, is shown.

[64] But (may the holy love wherein, with sight
perpetual, I watch and whence, with sweet
desire, I thirst, be all the more fulfilled!)

[67] be confident in voice, be brave and glad
to sound your will, to sound your best desire,
to which my answer has been long decreed.'

[70] I turned to Beatrice, who had heard
before I spoke. She smiled me such a sign

that made the wings of will in me grow strong.

[73]*-And so I now began: 'In you, each one,
the heart was balanced equally with mind
when Primal Equipoise appeared to you.

[76] The Sun that gleams and burns in you
itself is, equally, both light and fire,
so finely gauged comparison falls short.

[79] But will and intellect in mortal minds
(for reasons that are manifest to you)
are different in the plumage of their wings.

[82] And I discern, since I am mortal, in
myself the same unequalness. My heart
alone must thank you for your father-words.

[85] Truly I beg you, Topaz live and bright,
in-gemmed so joyfully within this jewel,
to bring your name to me in satisfaction.'

[88] 'My branch and leaf (in whom I was well pleased,
waiting until you came) I was your root.'
His opening words, as he replied, were these.

[91]*-And then he said: 'The one from whom your clan
takes its cognomen has walked the first ring
of the hill below a hundred years or more.

[94] He was my son, to you great-grandfather.
It's right that, by your works on his behalf,
you render short the time of his long labour.

[97] Florence, within the ancient ring, from which
she takes the bell-sound still of terce and nones,
lived on in modesty, chasteness and peace.

[100] No bangles had she, nor a showy crown,
no exquisite, embroidered skirts, no sash
more meant for viewing than the person was.

[103]*-As yet the birth of daughters did not bring
fear to the father: since no wedding dower
nor early marriage passed the proper norm.

[106]*-As yet, no house too roomy for its clan –
no Sardanapalus had yet arrived
to show what you can do in private rooms.

[109]*As yet, no Monte Mario in Rome
was beaten by your Aviary which wins
in rising high – as well as sinking low.

[112]*Bellincion Berti I saw girded there
with leather and bone, and, leaving her mirror,
his lady, her face without cosmetic.

[115] I saw the Nerli and del Vecchio
content to wear the plainest skin and hide,
their women occupied with loom and flax.

[118] How fortunate these were, each being sure
of where her grave would be! None yet was left
alone in bed by men who'd gone to France.

[121] One, still awake, would watch around the crib
and soothe the baby, babbling in the tongue
that parents thrill to in the early days.

[124] Another, drawing tresses from the spool,
sat with her family and told them tales
of Trojans, of Fiesole and Rome.

[127]*Lewd Cianghellas or sly Salterells
would then have seemed a marvel just as great
as Cincinnatus now or proud Cornelia.

[130] To this so tranquil and composed, so *fine*
a life of citizens, to such a true
civility, so sweet a resting place,

[133]*Maria gave me (birth-pangs called her name).
And in your ancient Baptistery, I was
Christian, and was Cacciaguida, too.

[136] My brothers were Moronto and Eliseo.
My honoured wife came down from Val di Pado,
and hence derived the surname that you bear.

[139]*I followed Emperor Conrad on crusade
and, rising in his favour by my deeds,
he bound me with all dignities of knighthood.

[142] I went behind him to oppose the wrong
of that misguided law whose devotees
usurp (it is your pastors' fault) true justice.

[145] There at the hand of this foul horde was I

unravelling from this world of vanities,
through love of which so many are besmirched,
[148] and came from martyrdom to this pure peace.'

Canto 16

[1] O poca nostra nobiltà di sangue,
se gloriar di te la gente fai
qua giù dove l'affetto nostro langue,

[4] mirabil cosa non mi sarà mai:
ché là dove appetito non si torce,
dico nel cielo, io me ne gloriai.

[7] Ben se' tu manto che tosto raccorce:
sì che, se non s'appon di dì in die,
lo tempo va dintorno con le force,

[10] Dal 'voi' che prima a Roma s'offerie,
in che la sua famiglia men persevera,
ricominciaron le parole mie;

[13] onde Beatrice, ch'era un poco scevra,
ridendo, parve quella che tossio
al primo fallo scritto di Ginevra.

[16] Io cominciai: 'Voi siete il padre mio;
voi mi date a parlar tutta baldezza;
voi mi levate sì, ch'i' son più ch'io.

[19] Per tanti rivi s'empie d'allegrezza
la mente mia, che di sè fa letizia
perchè può sostener che non si spezza.

[21] Ditemi dunque, cara mia primizia,
quai fuor li vostri antichi e quai fuor li anni
che si segnaro in vostra puerizia;

[25] ditemi de l'ovil di San Giovanni
quanto era allora, e chi eran le genti
tra esso degne di più alti scanni.'

[28] Come s'avviva a lo spirar d'i venti
carbone in fiamma, così vid' io quella
luce risplendere a' miei blandimenti;

[31] e come a li occhi miei si fé più bella,

così con voce più dolce e soave,
ma non con questa moderna favella,

[34] disse mi: ‘Da quel dì che fu detto “Ave”
al parto in che mia madre, ch’è or santa,
s’alleviò di me ond’ era grave,

[37] al suo Leon cinquecento cinquanta
e trenta fiate venne questo foco
a rinfiammarsi sotto la sua pianta.

[40] Li antichi miei e io nacqui nel loco
dove si truova pria l’ultimo sesto
da quei che corre il vostro annual gioco.

[43] Basti d’i miei maggiori udirne questo:
chi ei si fosser e onde venner quivi,
più è tacer che ragionare onesto.

[46] Tutti color ch’a quel tempo eran ivi
da poter arme tra Marte e ’l Batista,
eran il quinto di quei ch’or son vivi.

[49] Ma la cittadinanza, ch’è or mista
di Campi, di Certaldo e di Fegghine,
pura vediesi ne l’ultimo artista.

[52] Oh quanto fora meglio esser vicine
quelle genti ch’io dico, e al Galluzzo
e a Trespiano aver vostro confine,

[55] che averle dentro e sostener lo puzzo
del villan d’Aguglion, di quel da Signa,
che già per barattare ha l’occhio aguzzo!

[58] Se la gente ch’al mondo più traligna
non fosse stata a Cesare noverca,
ma come madre a suo figlio benigna,

[61] tal fatto è fiorentino e cambia e merca,
che si sarebbe vòlto a Simifonti,
là dove andava l’avolo a la cerca;

[64] sariesi Montemurlo ancor de’ Conti;
sarieno i Cerchi nel piovier d’Acone,
e forse in Valdigrive i Buondelmonti.

[67] Sempre la confusion de le persone
principio fu del mal de la cittade,

come del vostro il cibo che s'appone;

[70] e cieco toro più avaccio cade
che cieco agnello; e molte volte taglia
più e meglio una che le cinque spade.

[73] Se tu riguardi Luni e Orbisaglia
come sono ite, e come se ne vanno
di retro ad esse Chiusi e Sinigaglia,

[76] udir come le schiatte si disfanno
non ti parrà nova cosa né forte,
poscia che le cittadi termine hanno.

[79] Le vostre cose tutte hanno lor morte,
sì come voi; ma celasi in alcuna
che dura molto, e le vite son corte.

[82] E come 'l volger del ciel de la luna
cuopre e discuopre i liti senza posa,
così fa di Fiorenza la Fortuna:

[85] per che non dee parer mirabil cosa
ciò ch'io dirò de li alti Fiorentini
onde è la fama nel tempo nascosa.

[88] Io vidi li Ughi e vidi i Catellini,
Filippi, Greci, Ormanni e Alberichi,
già nel calare, illustri cittadini;

[91] e vidi così grandi come antichi,
con quel de la Sannella, quel de l'Arca,
e Soldanieri e Ardinghi e Bostichi.

[94] Sovra la porta ch'al presente è carca
di nova fellonia di tanto peso
che tosto fia iattura de la barca,

[97] erano i Ravignani, ond' e disceso
il conte Guido e qualunque del nome
de l'alto Bellincione ha poscia preso.

[100] Quel de la Pressa sapeva già come
regger si vuole, e avea Galigaio
dorata in casa sua già l'elsa e 'l pome.

[103] Grand' era già la colonna del Vaio,
Sacchetti, Giuochi, Fifanti e Barucci
e Galli e quei ch'arrossan per lo staio.

[106] Lo ceppo di che nacquero i Calfucci
era già grande, e già eran tratti
a le curule Sizii e Arrigucci.

[109] Oh quali io vidi quei che son disfatti
per lor superbia! e le palle de l'oro
fiorian Fiorenza in tutt' i suoi gran fatti.

[112] Così facieno i padri di coloro
che, sempre che la vostra chiesa vaca,
si fanno grassi stando a consistoro.

[115] L'oltracotata schiatta che s'indraca
dietro a chi fugge, e a chi mostra 'l dente
o ver la borsa, com' agnel si placa,

[118] già venìa sù, ma di picciola gente;
sì che non piacque ad Ubertin Donato
che poi il suocero il fé lor parente.

[121] Già era 'l Caponsacco nel mercato
disceso giù da Fiesole, e già era
buon cittadino Giuda e Infangato.

[124] Io dirò cosa incredibile e vera:
nel picciol cerchio s'entrava per porta
che si nomava da quei de la Pera.

[127] Ciascun che de la bella insegna porta
del gran barone il cui nome e 'l cui pregio
la festa di Tommaso riconforta,

[130] da esso ebbe milizia e privilegio;
avvegna che con popol si rauni
oggi colui che la fascia col fregio.

[133] Già eran Gualterotti e Importuni;
e ancor saria Borgo più quieto,
se di novi vicin fosser digiuni.

[136] La casa di che nacque il vostro fleto,
per lo giusto disdegno che v'ha morti
e puose fine al vostro viver lieto,

[139] era onorata, essa e suoi consorti:
o Buondelmonte, quanto mal fuggisti
le nozze sue per li altrui conforti!

[142] Molti sarebber lieti, che son tristi,

se Dio t'avesse concesso ad Ema
la prima volta ch'a città venisti.

[145] Ma conveniesi a quella pietra scema
che guarda 'l ponte, che Fiorenza fesse
vittima ne la sua pace postrema.

[148] Con queste genti, e con altre con esse,
vid' io Fiorenza in sì fatto riposo,
che non avea cagione onde piangesse.

[151] Con queste genti vid'io glorioso
e giusto il popol suo, tanto che 'l giglio
non era ad asta mai posto a ritroso,

[154] né per division fatto vermiglio.'

CANTO 16

[1] Nobility of blood, that whim of ours!
If here on earth, where feeling is so frail,
you make us boast the glories you bestow,

[4] to me henceforth that's nothing wonderful.
For there – in Heaven, I mean – where appetite
is never skewed, I, too, have boasted so.

[7] You are, of course, a mantle that soon shrinks.
So if you're not patched up from day to day,
Time with its pinking shears will circle you.

[10] So with that 'Thou' that ancient Romans used –
its clan, though, doesn't keep the usage up –
the words began once more to come from me.

[13] At this Beatrice (some way away)
smiled in the manner of the one who coughed
to mark the first mistake of Guinevere.

[16] Thus I began: 'Thou art indeed my father.
In me thou hast inspired my daring speech.
Thou raisest me so I am more than I.

[19] Filled by these many streams of happiness,
my mind rejoices in itself to bear
so much and not be shattered by the surge.

[22] Tell me my earliest, my dearest growth,
who were your own progenitors? Also,
what years were marked for you as boy and youth.

[25] Tell me how great the sheepfold of Saint John
at that time was, and which inhabitants
deserved the most to sit on highest thrones.'

[28] As coals, when breezes breathe them into flame,
brighten and live, this incandescence now
responded to my own persuasiveness.

[31] And as his beauty in my eyes increased,
so too his voice grew gentler, sweeter still,
though not in speech we moderns might employ.

[34] 'From when,' he answered, 'the "Ave" was said,

to when my mother, sainted now, gave birth –
lightening herself of me, the weight she bore –

[37] five hundred times and fifty and thirty,
this fire of Mars had come to strike new flame
beneath the paws of constellation Leo.

[40]*My ancestors (like me) had all been born
within that district where your yearly race
begins to enter on its final course.

[43] That's all you need to hear of my great sires.
Of who these were and from what place they came,
silence has greater dignity than speech.

[46] Between the Baptistery and Mars, the sum
of those who rightly could bear arms was then
a fifth of those who live there nowadays.

[49]*That population, though (now intermixed
with Campi and Fegghine and Certaldo folk),
was, to the merest craftsman, pure in blood.

[52] Better by far that those of whom I speak
were distant neighbours still, so you maintained
Galluzzo and Trespiano as your outer bounds

[55] than have within you – and so bear the stench –
of peasant Aguglione or that Signa cad,
sharp-eyed as ever for a shady quid.

[58]*If some – the very worst, degenerate priests! –
had been as kind as mothers to their sons,
and not played step-dame to Imperial rights,

[61] there's one, now Florentine, who wheels and deals
who'd soon have gone to Semifonte again,
where all his forebears did their daily rounds.

[64]*The Montemurli would be Conti serfs,
the Cerchi still Acone villagers,
the Buondelmonti maybe still mere Grievians.

[67] Miscegenation has at all times been
the origin, in cities, of all ills,
as when you gorge on undigested foods.

[70] A blinded bull falls quicker to the ground
than any blinded lamb. A single sword

at times cuts cleaner and more sure than five.

[73]*Consider Urbisaglia and Luni, too,
how both these towns have gone, and how, behind,
go also Chiusi and Sinigaglia.

[76] And when whole cities have, in this way, died,
it won't seem strange or hard for you to hear
that tribes and clans can likewise be unmade.

[79] All human things have their own deaths to meet,
as you do also (though in some, long-lived,
the truth of this lies hid). And lives are short.

[82] And, as the turning of the moon above
covers the shore unrestingly, and then
uncovers it, so Fortune does with Florence.

[85] This should not, therefore, seem remarkable –
all I shall tell of noble Florentines,
whose fame lies hidden now in passing time.

[88] I saw the Ughi, I saw the Catellini,
Filippi, Ormanni, Greci e Alberichi,
lready in decline, illustrious men.

[91] As great as they were ancient, I saw, too,
Bostichi, Soldanieri and Ardinghians,
the Arca and Sannella here as well.

[94] Nearby the gate – in present times so filled
with novel felonies of such great weight
that soon the vessel will unship its load –

[97] were once the Ravignani, from whom sprang
Count Guido, and, in later times, the clan
that takes its name from great Bellincion.

[100] La Pressa knew already what it meant
to serve in government. The Galigaio house
displayed the golden hilt and sword of chivalry.

[103] The Pale of Vair already had grown great,
Giuochi, Sacchetti, Barucci, Fifanti,
the Galli, too – and those who blush for salt-fraud.

[106] The stock that bore Calfuccians by now
was great, and also to the seats of power
Sizii and Arrigucci had been drawn.

[109] How well I saw them then, those now destroyed
by their own pride! Armorial orbs of gold
made Florence flower in all its enterprise.

[112] So did the fathers, too, of those who now,
on finding that your bishop's church is free,
grow fat as proxies in consistory.

[115] That bullying crew – which dragons over those
who run, but acts the very lamb when tooth
or even purse is flashed before its eyes –

[118] they had arrived, though humble in their roots –
so Ubertain Donato looked askance
to be their kinsman through his own wife's line.

[121] The Caponsacco of Fiesole m
had now come down to join the Market Place.
Giudi and Infangati were good citizens.

[124] I'll tell you this – incredible though true:
the gate through which one reached that little ring
was named in honour of some Pera clan!

[127] Each of that House that bears upon its coat
the name of that great baron who's renewed,
in worth and fame, at annual Thomas feasts,

[130] received from him chivalric rank and dues,
though he who binds his fringe around this sign
makes common cause with lower orders now.

[133]*The Importunes and Gualterotts were here.
The Borgo would have been a calmer place
if they'd still lacked the neighbours that then came.

[136] The House from which your flowing tears were born –
driven by rancour, rightfully, that slew
and put an end to your so-happy life –

[139] was honoured then, itself and all its kin.
O Buondelmonte! You so wrongly fled,
as others urged, your marriage promises.

[142] Many would now rejoice who now are sad
if God had yielded you to Ema's stream
when you arrived a first time in this town.

[145] Yet this still had to be, that Florence made –

at Mars's battered stone which guards the bridge –
in her last days of peace, this sacrifice.

[148] With all these people and with others, too,
I saw Florentia in such repose
that nothing could have caused it to lament.

[151]*With all of these, so true and glorious,
I saw your citizens, the lily-flag
not dragged, reversed upon its conquered pole,

[154] nor coloured in the conflict bright blood red.'

Canto 17

[1] Qual venne a Climenè, per accertarsi
di ciò ch'avea incontro a sé udito,
quei ch'ancor fa li padri ai figli scarsi;

[4] tal era io, e tal era sentito
e da Beatrice e da la santa lampa
che pria per me avea mutato sito.

[7] Per che mia donna 'Manda fuor la vampa
del tuo disio', mi disse, 'sì ch'ella esca
segnata bene de la interna stampa:

[10] non perchè nostra conoscenza cresca
per tuo parlare, ma perchè t'ausi
a dir la sete, sì che l'uom ti mesca.'

[13] 'O cara piota mia che sì t'insusi,
che, come veggion le terrene menti
non capere in triangol due ottusi,

[16] così vedi le cose contingenti
anzi che sieno in sè, mirando il punto
cui tutti li tempi son presenti;

[19] mentre ch'io era a Virgilio congiunto
su per lo monte che l'anime cura
e discendendo nel mondo defunto,

[22] dette mi fuor di mia vita futura
parole gravi, awegna ch'io mi senta
ben tetragono ai colpi di ventura;

[25] per che la voglia mia saria contenta
d'intender qual fortuna mi s'appressa:
chè saetta previsa vien più lenta.'

[28] Così diss' io a quella luce stessa
che pria m'avea parlato; e come volle
Beatrice, fu la mia voglia confessa.

[31] Né per ambage, in che la gente folle

già s'inviscava pria che fosse anciso
l'Agnel di Dio che le peccata tolle,

[34] ma per chiare parole e con preciso
latin rispuose quello amor paterno,
chiuso e parvente del suo proprio riso:

[37] 'La contingenza, che fuor del quaderno
de la vostra matera non si stende,
tutta è dipinta nel cospetto eterno;

[40] necessità però quindi non prende
se non come dal viso in che si specchia
ave che per torrente giù discende.

[43] Da indi, sì come viene ad orecchia
dolce armonia da organo, mi viene
vista il tempo che ti s'apparecchia.

[46] Qual si partio Ipolito d'Atene
per la spietata e perfida noverca,
tal di Fiorenza partir ti convene.

[49] Questo si vuole e questo già si cerca,
e tosto verrà fatto a chi ciò pensa
là dove Cristo tutto dì si merca.

[52] La colpa seguirà la parte offensa
fin grido, come suol; ma la vendetta
ia testimonio al ver che la dispensa.

[55] Tu lascerai ogne cosa diletta
più caramente; e questo eè quello strale
che l'arco de lo essilio pria saetta.

[58] Tu proverai sì come sa di sale
lo pane altrui, e come è duro calle
lo scendere e 'l salir per l'altrui scale.

[61] E quel che più ti graverà le spalle,
sarà la compagnia malvagia e scempia
con la qual tu cadrai in questa valle;

[64] che tutta ingrata, tutta matta ed empia
si farà contr' a te; ma, poco appresso,
ella, non tu, n'avrà rossa la tempia.

[67] Di sua bestialitate il suo processo
farà la prova; sì ch'a te fia bello

averti fatta parte per te stesso.

[70] Lo primo tuo refugio e 'l primo ostello
sarà la cortesia del gran Lombardo
che 'n su la scala porta il santo uccello;

[73] ch'in te avrà sì benigno riguardo,
che del fare e del chieder, tra voi due,
fia primo quel che tra li altri è più tardo.

[76] Con lui vedrai colui che 'mpresso fue,
nascendo, sì da questa Stella forte,
che notabili fier l'opere sue.

[79] Non se ne son le genti ancora accorte
per la novella età, ché pur nove anni
son queste rote intorno di lui torte;

[82] ma pria che 'l Guasco halto Arrigo inganni,
parran faville de la sua virtute
in non curar d'argento nè d'affanni.

[85] Le sue magnificenze conosciute
saranno ancora, sì che ' suoi nemici
non ne potran tener le lingue mute.

[88] A lui t'aspetta e a' suoi benefici;
per lui fia trasmutata molta gente,
cambiando condizion ricchi e mendici;

[91] e porterà'ne scritto ne la mente
di lui, e nol dirai'; e disse cose
incredibili a quei che fier presente.

[94] Poi giunse: 'Figlio, queste son le chiose
di quel che ti fu detto; ecco le 'nsidie
che dietro a pochi giri son nascose.

[97] Non vo' però ch'a' tuoi vicini invidie,
poscia che s'infutura la tua vita
vie più là che 'l punir di lor perfidie.'

[100] Poi che, tacendo, si mostrò spedita
l'anima santa di metter la trama
in quella tela ch'io le porsi ordita,

[103] io cominciai, come colui che brama,
dubitando, consiglio da persona
che vede e vuol dirittamente e ama:

[106] ‘Ben veggio, padre mio, sì come sprona
lo tempo verso me, per colpo darmi
tal, ch’è più grave a chi più s’abbandona;

[109] per che di provedenza è buon ch’io m’armi,
sì che, se loco m’è tolto più caro,
io non perdessi li altri per miei carmi.

[112] Già per lo mondo senza fine amaro,
e per lo monte del cui bel cacume
li occhi de la mia donna mi levaro,

[115] e poscia per lo ciel, di lume in lume,
ho io appreso quel che s’io ridico,
a molti fia sapor di forte argume;

[118] e s’io al vero son timido amico,
temo di perder viver tra coloro
che questo tempo chiameranno antico.’

[121] La luce in che rideva il mio tesoro
ch’io trovai li, sì fé prima corusca,
quale a raggio di sole specchio d’oro;

[124] indi rispuose: ‘Coscienza fusca
o de la propria o de l’altrui vergogna
pur sentira la tua parola brusca.

[127] Ma nondimen, rimossa ogne menzogna,
tutta tua vision fa manifesta;
e lascia pur grattar dov’ è la rogna.

[130] Chè se la voce tua sarà molesta
nel primo gusto, vital nodrimento
lascerà poi, quando sarà digesta.

[133] Questo tuo grido farà come vento,
che le più alte cime più percuote;
e ciò non fa d’onor poco argomento.

[136] Però ti son mostrate in queste rote,
nel monte e ne la valle dolorosa
pur l’anime che son di fama note,

[139] che l’animo di quel ch’ode, non posa
né ferma fede per essempro ch’aia
la sua radice incognita e ascosa,

[142] nè per altro argomento che non paia.’

CANTO 17

[1] As Phaeton once, approaching Clymene,
to know for sure that news about himself
which still makes fathers chary of their sons,

[4] so was I, too – and so was understood
by Beatrice and that holy lamp
which had, because of me, first left its place.

[7] At which my lady said: ‘Send out the flare
of your desire, as clear in coming forth
as, inwardly, the fire is stamped in you,

[10] not to increase, by saying what that is,
the knowledge we already have, but more,
to find, when speaking out, we slake your thirst.’

[13] ‘You, the dear soil in which I thrive. You so
on-high yourself that you see well (as sure
as mortals know, in triangles, two angles

[16] aren’t obtuse) contingencies before
they come to be, your eye set wondering on
the point at which all times are present time.

[19] While I was still in Virgil’s company,
climbing the hill that remedies our souls,
so, too, descending to the dead, waste world,

[22] he spoke to me in grave and weighty words
about my future life, so I should feel
four-square against the blows that were to come.

[25] I’d therefore willingly receive sure words
that told what fortune now draws near to me.
Those arrows that we know will come fly slower.’

[28] I said all this to that same light that, first,
had spoken out to me, and thus confessed,
as Beatrice wished, what I desired.

[31]* Not in those enigmatic words that once
entrammelled pagan fools, like birds in lime,
before the Lamb of God bore off their sin,

[34] but clear, precise and solemn in his speech,

that father-love now gave me his reply,
enclosed, yet shown, in his own laughing light.

[37]* ‘Contingency, whose sphere does not extend
beyond the margins of your earthly things,
is framed and painted in eternal sight.

[40] This does not, though, imply necessity,
except, as might be when some glass reflects
ship swept onward by a raging stream.

[43] From that same view there comes before my eyes
(as to the ear sweet melodies may come)
he time that now prepares itself for you.

[46] As once Hippolytus was driven out
of Athens by his father’s wife, perverse
and pitiless, so you’ll leave Florence, too.

[49]* This much is willed, this much already sought.
And soon he’ll see it through, who thinks it up,
where all day long Christ’s self is bought and sold.

[52] Shrill cries of blame will chase the ones who lose –
they always do. But vengeance, when it falls,
will speak of that same Truth that deals it out.

[55] You’ll leave behind you all you hold most dear.
And this will be the grievous arrow barb
that exile, first of all, will shoot your way.

[58] And you will taste the saltiness of bread
when offered by another’s hand – as, too,
how hard it is to climb a stranger’s stair.

[61]* Yet what will weigh upon your shoulders worst
is all the foul, ill-minded company
that you, in that dark vale, will fall to keep.

[64] For that ungrateful, crazy, vicious crew
will turn as one against you. Yet it’s them
whose brows before too long will blush with shame.

[67] Their deeds will prove what animals they are.
And so much so, the finer course for you
would be to form a party on your own.

[70]* Your refuge and your safe abode will be
the courtesy at first of that great Lombard

whose blazon is a stair and holy bird.

[73] And he will hold you in such high regard
that “ask” and “do” between the two of you
will place as first what others put behind.

[76] You’ll see, along with him, his brother, too,
so strongly marked, when he was born, by Mars
that all his deeds will prove remarkable.

[79] People as yet know nothing of this man.
He is still fresh and young. The astral wheels
have worked around him for a mere nine years.

[82]* Before the Gascon tricks great Henry, though,
the sparks of his high virtue will appear,
scornful of silver and the toils of war.

[85] His proud liberality will make its mark,
and even enemies, in seeing that,
will have no power to mute their tongues in praise.

[88] Await him, and the good he’ll bring to you.
By him a multitude will be transformed,
the poor exalted and the rich brought low.

[91] Now carry, written in your memory
(don’t speak!), report of him.’ He then said things
that even witnesses will not believe.

[94] He added, then: ‘It was of this, dear son,
they spoke. These are the wiles and snares that lie
concealed by some few circlings of the stars.

[97] Yet I’d not have you envy those around.
Your life and fame en-futures far beyond
the punishment their perfidy receives.’

[100] Now falling silent, that most sacred soul
declared his hand unburdened of the thread
of that taut weave which I had stretched for him.

[103] So I began – as anyone in doubt
goes on and craves good counsel from the one
who sees, whose will is right, whose love is strong.

[106] ‘I now see clearly, Father, how the years spur down
on me – and how the blow they mean to strike
is worse to those who, fleeing, flinch aside.

[109] It's better, then, I arm myself with foresight,
so if that dearest place is snatched away,
my verses do not lose me all the rest.

[112] Down through the world of endless bitterness, m
around the mountain where my lady's look
raised me so I could reach its lovely peak,

[115] then through these heavenly spheres, from light to light
I've learnt of things which, if I now repeat,
will leave in many mouths an acid taste.

[118] And if I prove a timid friend to truth
I shall, I fear, forego my life among
those souls who'll count as ancient our own time.'

[121] The light in which the treasure I found there
was smiling still, first blazed in coruscations
as will a ray of sun in golden mirrors,

[124] and then replied: 'All murky consciences,
who feel their own or any other's shame
are bound to baulk at your abrasive words.

[127] But none the less, all lies put clean aside,
make plain what in your vision you have seen,
and let them scratch wherever they may itch.

[130] For if at first your voice tastes odious,
still it will offer, as digestion works,
life-giving nutriment to those who eat.

[133] The words you shout will be like blasts of wind
that strike the very summit of the trees.
And this will bring no small degree of fame.

[136] For you've been shown in all these circling wheels –
around the mountain, in the sorrowing vale –
only those souls whose fame is widely known,

[139] since those who hear you speak will never pause
or give belief to any instances
whose family roots are hidden or unknown,

[142] nor demonstrations that remain obscure.'

Canto 18

[1] Già si godeva solo del suo verbo
quello specchio beato, e io gustava
lo mio, temprando col dolce l'acerbo;

[4] e quella donna ch'a Dio mi menava
disse: 'Muta pensier; pensa ch'i' sono
presso a colui ch'ogne torto disgrava.'

[7] Io mi rivolsi a l'amoroso suono
del mio conforto; e qual io allor vidi
ne li occhi santi amor, qui l'abbandono:

[10] non perch' io pur del mio parlar diffidi,
ma per la mente che non può redire
ovra sé tanto, s'altri non la guidi.

[13] Tanto poss' io di quel punto ridire,
che, rimirando lei, lo mio affetto
libero fu da ogni altro disire,

[16] fin che 'l piacere eterno, che diretto
raggiava in Beatrice, dal bel viso
mi contentava col secondo aspetto.

[19] Vincendo me col lume d'un sorriso,
ella mi disse: 'Volgiti e ascolta;
che non pur ne' miei occhi è paradiso'.

[22] Come si vede qui alcuna volta
l'affetto ne la vista, s'elli è tanto,
che da lui sia tutta l'anima tolta,

[25] così nel fiammeggiar del folgór santo,
a ch'io mi volsi, conobbi la voglia
in lui di ragionarmi ancora alquanto.

[28] El cominciò: 'In questa quinta soglia
de l'albero che vive de la cima
e frutta sempre e mai non perde foglia,

[31] spiriti son beati, che giù, prima

che venissero al ciel, fuor di gran voce,
sì ch'ogne musa ne sarebbe opima.

[34] Però mira ne' corni de la croce:
quello ch'io numerò, li farà l'atto
che fa in nube il suo foco veloce.'

[37] Io vidi per la croce un lume tratto
dal nomar Iosué, com' el si feo;
né mi fu noto il dir prima che 'l fatto.

[40] E al nome de l'alto Macabeo
vidi moversi un altro roteando,
e letizia era ferza del paleo.

[43] Così per Carlo Magno e per Orlando
due ne seguì lo mio attento sguardo,
com' occhio segue suo falcon volando.

[46] Poscia trasse Guiglielmo e Rinoardo
e 'l duca Gottifredi la mia vista
per quella croce, e Ruberto Guiscardo.

[49] Indi, tra l'altre luci mota e mista,
mostrommi l'alma che m'avea parlato
qual era tra i cantor del cielo artista.

[52] Io mi rivolsi dal mio destro lato
per vedere in Beatrice il mio dovere,
o per parlare o per atto, segnato;

[55] e vidi le sue luci tanto mere,
tanto gioconde, che la sua sembianza
vinceva li altri e l'ultimo solere.

[58] E come, per sentir più diletanza
bene operando, l'uom di giorno in giorno
s'accorge che la sua virtute avanza,

[61] sì m'accors' io che 'l mio girare intorno
col cielo insieme avea cresciuto l'arco,
veggendo quel miracol più addorno.

[64] E qual è 'l trasmutare in picciol varco
di tempo in bianca donna, quando 'l volto
suo si discarchi di vergogna il carico,

[67] tal fu ne li occhi miei, quando fui vòlto,
per lo candor de la temprata stella

sesta, che dentro a sé m'avea ricolto.

[70] Io vidi in quella giovial facella
lo sfavillar de l'amor che lì era
segnare a li occhi miei nostra favella.

[73] E come augelli surti di rivera,
quasi congratulando a lor pasture,
fanno di sè or tonda or altra schiera,

[76] sì dentro ai lumi sante creature
volitando cantavano, e faciensi
or *D*, or *I*, or *L* in sue figure.

[79] Prima, cantando, a sua nota moviensi;
poi, diventando l'undi questi segni,
un poco s'arrestavano e taciensi.

[82] O diva Pegasea che li 'ngegni
fai gloriosi e rendili longevi,
ed essi teco le cittadi e ' regni,

[85] illustrami di te, sì ch'io rilevi
le lor figure com' io l'ho concette:
paia tua possa in questi versi brevi!

[88] Mostrarsi dunque in cinque volte sette
vocali e consonanti; e io notai
le parti sì, come mi parver dette.

[91] '*DILIGITE IUSTITIAM*', primai
fur verbo e nome di tutto 'l dipinto;
'*Q UI IU DICAT IS TER RAM*', fur sezzai.

[94] Poscia ne l'emme del vocabol quinto
rimasero ordinate; sì che Giove
pareva argento lì d'oro distinto.

[97] E vidi scendere altre luci dove
era il colmo de l'emme, e lì quetarsi
cantando, credo, il ben ch'a sè le move.

[100] Poi, come nel percuoter d'i ciocchi arsi
surgono innumerabili faville,
onde li stolti sogliono agurarsi,

[103] resurger parver quindi più di mille
luci e salir, qual assai e qual poco,
sì come 'l sol che l'accende sortille;

[106] e quietata ciascuna in suo loco,
la testa e 'l collo d'un'aguglia vidi
rappresentare a quel distinto foco.

[109] Quei che dipinge lì, non ha chi 'l guidi;
ma esso guida, e da lui si rammenta
quella virtù ch'è forma per li nidi.

[112] L'altra beatitudo, che contenta
pareva prima d'ingigliarsi a l'emme,
con poco moto seguitò la 'mprenta.

[115] O dolce Stella, quali e quante gemme
mi dimostraro che nostra giustizia
effetto sia del ciel che tu ingemme!

[118] Per ch'io prego la mente in che s'inizia
tuo moto e tua virtute, che rimiri
ond' esce il fummo che 'l tuo raggio vizia;

[121] sì ch'un'altra fiata omai s'adiri
del comperare e vender dentro al templo
che si murò di segni e di martìri.

[124] O milizia del ciel cu' io contemplo,
adora per color che sono in terra
tutti sviati dietro al malo esemplo!

[127] Già si solea con le spade far guerra;
ma or si fa togliendo or qui or quivi
lo pan che 'l pio Padre a nessun serra.

[130] Ma tu che sol per cancellare scrivi,
pensa che Pietro e Paulo, che moriro
per la vigna che guasti, ancor son vivi.

[133] Ben puoi tu dire: 'I' ho fermo 'l disiro
sì a colui che voile viver solo
e che per salti fu tratto al martiro,

[136] ch'io non conosco il pescator né Polo.'

CANTO 18

[1] Already, whole in happiness, that mirror
turned, rejoicing, to its own true word.

I tasted mine – and tempered sour with sweet.

[4] And then that lady, leading me to God,
spoke out: ‘Revise those thoughts. Think this, that I
am near to Him who lifts all wrongs away.’

[7] I turned towards that sound so full of love
(my strength, my comforter!) but saw, within
those holy eyes, a love I leave unsaid,

[10] unsure not only of my powers of speech,
but Memory, as well – which cannot, if not led,
return, above itself, to that degree.

[13] This much of that one point I can repeat:
my heart, in awe now looking back at her,
was free of all desires, save that alone –

[16] as long, at least, as eternal delight,
which shone in Beatrice’s lovely eyes,
made me, in its reflected view, content.

[19] A smile – its light defeating me – she now
addressed me: ‘Turn around. Pay heed to him.
Heaven is found not only in my eyes.’

[22] As sometimes here on earth a face is seen
displaying all its feelings – when the soul
is caught completely in these sentiments –

[25] so in the flaming of that holy flare,
as now I turned to it, I recognized
a will to have some further words with me.

[28] ‘In this, the fifth espalier of that tree
that thrives,’ so he began, ‘from summit down,
bears constant fruit and never loses leaf,

[31] are spirits of the blessed who, there below,
won such renown before they reached these spheres
that any muse which sang of them would thrive.

[34] So look in wonder on this Cross’s horns.

Each one I name to you will act as does
the swift fire darting through a thunder cloud.'

[37]* I saw, along the Cross-tree's beam, a light,
drawn all along that length by Joshua's name.
Nor did I note the name before the deed.

[40] Then at the name of great Maccabeus,
I saw another, wheeling as it moved,
a spinning top whipped round by happiness.

[43] Then, as the eye will track a falcon's flight,
my own attentive gaze now followed two,
seeking out Roland and great Charlemagne.

[46] And then along the Cross my sight was drawn
to William, Reynald, Godfrey of Bouillon,
and with them, too, Roberto Guiscardo.

[49] Then moving, mingling with the other lights,
the soul that first had spoken now displayed
his own great art with these who sang the skies.

[52] I turned to Beatrice at my right,
to see in her some gesture, word or sign,
to show me what my duty now must be,

[55] and saw the light within her eye so clear,
so full of laughter that her look and air
defeated all that these, before, had been.

[58] And, as we recognize from day to day
that we, in doing good, have now advanced
when, doing good, we feel a greater joy,

[61] so, too, as with the skies I circled round,
I knew the arc through which we swung had grown,
seeing that miracle yet more adorned.

[64] Compare: within the briefest span of time,
a lady pale in countenance will change,
when once she frees her blushing cheeks from shame.

[67] At that same speed, turning, my eyes received
the candour of the temperate star – the sixth –
which now collected me within its sphere.

[70] I saw in that great torch of Jupiter
the scintillations of a love that, here,

sparked signs before my eyes in human speech.

[73] Like birds that rise above a river bank
and, chorusing in joy at food they find,
form flying discs and various other shapes,

[76] so, deep in light, these holy creatures sang
and, as they winged around, they now assumed
the figure of a D, then I, then L.

[79] Singing, at first, the notes of their own tune,
they then (becoming one of these three signs)
paused for a moment and let silence fall.

[82]* You holy Pegasean Muse, who grants
to intellect its glory and long fame –
as, through such minds, to realms and cities, too –

[85] inspire me with your light, so I may draw
those figures as I first conceived they were.
In these brief verses let your power appear.

[88] In five times seven vowels and consonants
it fashioned this display. And I took note
of all these parts as they appeared to me.

[91] *DILIGITE IUSTITIAM*: these first –
main verb and noun of all that bright design.
QUI IUDIC ATIS TERRAM – these came last.

[94] And then they gathered on the final M,
arranged so Jupiter seemed silver now
picked out in painted ornaments of gold.

[97] And then I saw, descending, other lights
to mount the summit of the M and pause,
singing the Good, I think, that drew them to him.

[100] Then, as when burning logs are struck, and sparks,
beyond all number, rise around (from which
fools, once, in pagan times drew auguries),

[103] it seemed that from this more than a thousand
lights rose surging up, some higher, some less,
is God's sun, kindling them, ascribed their place.

[106] And, once each rested at its proper point,
I saw, distinctly shown in golden fire,
the image of an Eagle's head and neck.

[109] He who paints there needs none to guide his hand.
He is the guide. From Him, we recognize,
derives the power that forms in our own nests.

[112] Those others in beatitude who, first,
in-lilying the M, had been content,
now joined, with no great movement, that same sign.

[115] Sweetest of stars! So many gems, so fine,
to make this known to me! Our justice is
produced by that great sky that you in-gem.

[118] So I beseech the Mind, in which begins
the motion and the strength you have, now look
at where the fumes arise that taint your rays,

[121]*so that a second time He should now rage
at 'buy' and 'sell' within those temple walls,
once built by miracles and martyrdom.

[124] You heavenly army that I gaze on now,
pray earnestly for those who are, on earth,
led by this vile example all astray.

[127] War was at one time waged with swords alone.
But now it's done by snatching, here and there,
the bread our loving Father locks from none.

[130]*But you – I write of you to blot you out –
just think that Paul and Peter who both died
to serve the vine that you lay waste, live still.

[133] You may well say: 'I'm firm in my desire
to be like John who lived his life alone,
drawn to his martyrdom by sprightly dance,

[136] and so don't know this fisherman, or Paul.'

Canto 19

[1] Parea dinanzi a me con l'ali aperte
la bella image che nel dolce *frui*
liete facevan Panime conserte;

[4] parea ciascuna rubinetto in cui
raggio di sole ardesse sì acceso,
che ne' miei occhi rifrangesse lui.

[7] E quel che mi convien ritrar testeso,
non portò voce mai, né scrisse incostro,
né fu per fantasià già mai compreso;

[10] ch'io vidi e anche udi' parlar lo rostro,
e sonar ne la voce e 'io' e 'mio',
quand' era nel concetto e 'noi' e 'nostro'.

[13] E cominciò: 'Per esser giusto e pio
son io qui essaltato a quella gloria
che non si lascia vincere a disio;

[16] e in terra lasciai la mia memoria
sì fatta, che le genti lì malvage
commendan lei, ma non seguon la storia.'

[19] Così un sol calor di molte brage
si fa sentir, come di molti amori
usciva solo un suon di quella image.

[22] Ond' io appresso: 'O perpetui fiori
de l'eterna letizia, che pur uno
parer mi fate tutti vostri odori,

[25] solvetemi, spirando, il gran digiuno
che lungamente m'ha tenuto in fame,
non trovandoli in terra cibo alcuno.

[28] Ben so io che, se 'n cielo altro reame
la divina giustizia fa suo specchio,
che 'l vostro non l'apprende con velame.

[31] Sapete come attento io m'apparecchio

ad ascoltar; sapete qual è quello
dubbio che m'è digiun cotanto vecchio.'

[34] Quasi falcone ch'esce del cappello,
move la testa e con l'ali si plaude,
voglia mostrando e faccendosi bello,

[37] vid' io farsi quel segno, che di laude
de la divina grazia era contesto,
con canti quai si sa chi là sù gaùde.

[40] Poi cominciò: 'Colui che volse il sesto
a lo stremo del mondo, e dentro ad esso
distinse tanto occulto e manifesto,

[43] non poté suo valor sì fare impresso
in tutto l'auniverso, che 'l suo verbo
non rimanesse in infinito eccesso.

[46] E ciò fa certo che 'l primo superbo,
che fu la somma d'ogne creatura,
per non aspettar lume, cadde acerbo;

[49] e quirrci appar ch'ogne minor natura
è corto recettacolo a quel bene
che non ha fine e se con se misura.

[52] Dunque vostra veduta, che conviene
esser alcun de' raggi de la mente
di che tutte le cose son ripiene,

[55] non pò da sua natura esser possente
tanto, che suo principio discerna
molto di là da quel che l'è parvente.

[58] Però ne la giustizia sempiterna
la vista che riceve il vostro mondo,
com' occhio per lo mare, entro s'interna;

[61] che, ben che da la proda veggia il fondo,
in pelago nol vede; e nondimeno
èli, ma cela lui Pesser profondo.

[64] Lume non è, se non vien dal sereno
che non si turba mai; anzi è tenèbra
od ombra de la carne o suo veleno.

[67] Assai t'è mo aperta la latebra
che t'ascondeva la giustizia viva,

di che facei question cotanto crebra;

[70] chè tu dicevi: “Un uom nasce a la riva
de l’Indo, e quivi non è chi ragioni
di Cristo né chi legga né chi scriva;

[73] e tutti suoi voleri e atti buoni
sono, quanto ragione umana vede,
senza peccato in vita o in sermoni.

[76] Muore non battezzato e senza fede:
ov’ è questa giustizia che ’l condanna?
ov’ è la colpa sua, se ei non crede?”

[79] Or tu chi se’, che vuo’ sedere a scranna,
per giudicar di lungi mille miglia
con la veduta corta d’una spanna?

[82] Certo a colui che meco s’assottiglia,
se la Scrittura sovra voi non fosse,
da dubitar sarebbe a maraviglia.

[85] Oh terreni animali! oh menti grosse!
La prima volontà, ch’è da sé buona,
da sé, ch’è sommo ben, mai non si mosse.

[88] Cotanto è giusto quanto a lei consuona:
nullo creato bene a sé la tira,
ma essa, radiando, lui cagiona.’

[91] Quale sovresso il nido si rigira
poi c’ha pasciuti la cicogna i figli,
e come quel ch’è pasto la rimira;

[94] cotal si fece, e sì levai i cigli,
la benedetta imagine, che l’ali
movea sospinte da tanti consigli.

[97] Roteando cantava, e dicea: ‘Quali
son le mie note a te, che non le ‘ntendi,
tal è il giudizio eterno a voi mortali.’

[100] Poi si quetaro quei lucenti incendi
de lo Spirito Santo ancor nel segno
che fé i Romani al mondo reverendi,

[103] esso ricominciò: ‘A questo regno
non salì mai chi non credette ‘n Cristo,
né pria né poi ch’el si chiavasse al legno.

[106] Ma vedi: molti gridan “Cristo, Cristo!”,
che saranno in giudicio assai men *prope*
a lui, che tal che non conosce Cristo;

[109] e tai Cristian dannerà l’Etiòpe,
quando si partiranno i due collegi,
l’uno in eterno ricco e l’altro inòpe.

[112] Che poran dir li Perse a’ vostri regi,
come vedranno quel volume aperto
nel qual si scrivon tutti suoi dispregi?

[115] Lì si vedrà, tra l’opere d’Alberto,
quella che tosto movera là penna,
per che ’l regno di Praga fia deserto.

[118] Lì si vedrà il duol che sovra Senna
induce, falseggiando la moneta,
quel che morrà di colpo di cotenna.

[121] Lì si vedrà la superbia ch’assetta,
che fa lo Scotto e l’Inghilese folle,
sì che non può soffrir dentro a sua meta.

[124] Vedrassi la lussuria e ’l viver molle
di quel di Spagna e di quel di Boemme,
che mai valor non conobbe né voile.

[127] Vedrassi al Ciotto di Ierusalemme
segnata con un i la sua bontate,
quando ’l contrario segnerà un emme.

[130] Vedrassi l’avarizia e la viltate
di quei che guarda l’isola del foco,
ove Anchise finì la lunga etate;

[133] e a dare ad intender quanto è poco,
la sua scrittura fian lettere mozze,
che noteranno molto in parvo loco.

[136] E parranno a ciascun l’opere sozze
del barba e del fratel, che tanto egregia
nazione e due corone han fatte bozze.

[139] E quel di Portogallo e di Norvegia
lì si conosceranno, e quel di Rascia
che male ha visto il conio di Vinegia.

[142] Oh beata Ungheria, se non si lascia

più malmenare! e beata Navarra,
se s'armasse del monte che la fascia!

[145] E creder de' ciascun che già, per arra
di questo, Niccosia e Famagosta
per la lor bestia si lamenti e garra,

[148] che dal fianco de l'altre non si scosta.'

CANTO 19

[1]* It showed before me now with open wings –
that lovely emblem which those happy souls
composed in utmost *frui*, interwoven.

[4] Each soul showed forth as minute rubies might.
In each a sun ray burned with such new fire
its light, reflected, broke back from my eyes.

[7] But now there's something I must draw to mind
that no voice ever carried, ink inscribed,
or great imagination ever grasped.

[10] I saw and heard that Eagle's beak form words
that rang, in what they voiced, as T and 'mine',
although in meaning they were 'we' and 'us'.

[13] 'I am' – beginning so – 'through being true,
and just in all things, raised to glorious heights
that no desire could ever overcome.

[16] On earth I leave so great a memory
that even evil-minded men down there
who don't take up the tale still honour it.'

[19] From many coals we feel one wave of heat.
So, too, from all these many loving souls,
a single sound came issuing from its form.

[22] So I at once: 'You are, perpetually,
the flowerings of eternal happiness.
And all your perfumes are, to me, as one.

[25] Breathing upon me, set me free, untie
the hankering that's held me now so long,
On earth I find no food for it at all.

[28] God's justice, as I know from all I've seen,
is mirrored, in these spheres, by other realms.
But your sphere comprehends it, through no veil.

[31] And you know how attentively I've come,
prepared to hear. You know the doubt as well,
the old, long hungering I suffer from.'

[34] As falcons, shaking free from training-hoods,

will move their heads, applauding with their wings,
to show their zeal and make themselves look fine,

[37] so did this emblem, woven out of praise
that sang the glory of God's grace, in hymns
that those who celebrate above will know.

[40] 'The One who turned His compass,' it began,
'around the reaches of the universe,
and marked, within, things clear and dark to view,

[43] might blaze His worth upon that cosmic plan,
yet could not fail, in doing so, to leave,
as infinite excess, His truest word.

[46] As proof of this, that being, first in pride,
the summit, once, of all creation, fell –
he would not wait for light – acid, unripe.

[49] From which it's clear that natures less than his
are all too shallow to contain that Good
which has no end and measures self by self.

[52] Therefore, the powers of sight that you possess –
which must exist as rays from that one Mind
with which all things that are are brimming full –

[55] cannot, in their own nature, be so great
that their Original should not have sight
of much beyond what, there, appears to them.

[58] It follows that the sight your world receives
in sempiternal justice sinks itself
three-fold as deep as eyes in open sea.

[61] Although you see the bottom near the shore,
the ocean floor you *can't*. And yet it's there.
Its depths conceal its being so profound.

[64] There is no light except from that clear calm,
changeless, untroubled. Others are tenebrae,
the shadows or the venom of the flesh.

[67] It's open now enough, that brooding deep –
where, hidden from you, living justice lay –
of which so frequently you've made demand.

[70] "A man is born," you've said repeatedly,
"beside the Indus. And there's no one there

who speaks of Christ, or reads or writes of Him.

[73] And all he does and all he means to do –
as far as human minds can tell – is good,
sinless alike in living and in word.

[76] Then, unbaptized, beyond the faith, he dies.
Where is the justice that condemns him thus?
Where is his guilt, if he does not believe?”

[79] Well, who are you to sit there on your throne,
acting the judge a thousand miles away,
eyesight as short as some mere finger span?

[82] Of course, all those who seek to pin me down
might find amazing reasons for their doubts,
except the Scriptures are set over you.

[85] You earthbound creatures, dense in thought and head!
The Primal Will, which of itself is good,
has never from its own high good been moved.

[88] What counts as just will ring in tune with that.
No creature – good draws that will to itself.
But *that* – its rays projecting – causes *this*.’

[91] Compare: a mother stork has fed its young
and, while its chick, well-nourished, gazes up,
it flies in circles high above the nest.

[94] So, too, it rose – I raised my brows to it –
that emblem in its blessedness, which moved
with wings supported on the truths it spoke.

[97] Wheeling, it sang and, singing, said: ‘To you
our melodies – which you don’t understand –
are as eternal justice is to mortal minds.’

[100] And then these glowing fires of Holy Breath
grew quiet once again within that sign
which, in the world, made Romans so revered,

[103] then spoke anew: ‘There is, in this realm, none
who ever rose that had no faith in Christ
since, or before, they nailed Him to the wood.

[106] But see this: many cry out: “Christ! Christ! Christ!”
Yet many will, come Judgement, be to Him
less *prope* than are those who don’t know Christ.

[109] And Christians such as these the Ethiopian
will damn when souls divide between two schools,
some to eternal riches, some to dearth.

[112] What will the Persians say about your kings,
when once they see that ledger opened up
in which is written all their praiseless doings.

[115]* Peer at that page, and see in Albert's deeds
one – which will shortly stir God's pen to write –
by which the realm of Prague lies waste and dead.

[118] Peer at that page, and see there one who grieved
the Seine in uttering his worthless coin,
dying when toppled by a wild boar's hide.

[121] Peer at that page, and you'll see there the pride
that sharpens in mad Englishmen and Scots
such thirst that neither keeps their native bounds.

[124] O there you'll see the lust and lecherous lives
of Spanish and Bohemian sovereigns,
who know no honour, nor desire to know.

[127] O there you'll see the Cripple of Jerusalem
scoring mere "one" for virtuous effect,
and *thousands* in the column opposite.

[130]* O there you'll see the weak-kneed graspingness
of one who governs in the isle of fire
where once Anchises ended his long days.

[133] 'Xcept, to show how paltry his deeds are
the writing here will be in brief, maimed words,
and thus will note down much in little space.

[136] 'Xcept, to all the loathsome acts will show
of nuncle and his brud, those two who turned
so great a race to cuckolds – and two crowns.

[139]* 'Xcept, the Portuguese and Norway kings
will there be recognized, the Rascian, too,
who set eyes falsely on Venetian coin.

[142] O blessèd Hungary, if you resist
further bad government! Blessed Navarre,
if you can arm the hills that swaddle you!

[145] And that is pledged, as all should well believe,

by French-ruled Nicosia and Famagosta,
lamenting, shrieking in their agony
[148] against their beast, who huddles with the rest.'

Canto 20

[1] Quando colui che tutto 'l mondo alluma
de l'emisperio nostro sì discende,
che 'l giorno d'ogne parte si consuma,

[4] lo ciel, che sol di lui prima s'accende,
subitamente si rifà parvente
per molte luci, in che una risplende;

[7] equesto atto del ciel mi venne a mente,
come 'l segno del mondo e de' suoi duci
nel benedetto rostro fu tacente;

[10] però che tutte quelle vive luci,
vie più lucendo, cominciaron canti
da mia memoria labili ecaduci.

[13] O dolce amor che di riso t'ammanti,
quanto parevi ardente in que' flailli,
ch'avieno spirto sol di pensier santi!

[16] Poscia che i cari elucidi lapilli
ond' io vidi ingemmato il sesto lume
puoser silenzio a li angelici squilli,

[19] udir mi parve un mormorar di fiume
che scende chiaro giù di pietra in pietra,
ostrando l'ubertà del suo cacume.

[22] E come suono al collo de la cetra
prende sua forma, e sì com' al pertugio
de la sampogna vento che penètra,

[25] così, rimosso d'aspettare indugio,
quel mormorar de l'aguglia salissi
u per lo collo, come fosse bugio.

[28] Fecesi voce quivi, equindi uscissi
per lo suo becco in forma di parole,
quali aspettava il core ov' io le scrissi.

[31] 'La parte in me che vede epate il sole

ne l'aguglie mortali', incominciommi,
'or fisamente riguardar si vole,

[34] perchè d'i fuochi ond' io figura fommi,
quelli onde l'occhio in testa mi scintilla,
e' di tutti lor gradi son li sommi.

[37] Colui che luce in mezzo per pupilla,
fu il cantor de lo Spirito Santo,
che l'arca traslatò di villa in villa:

[40] ora conosce il merto del suo canto,
in quanto effetto fu del suo consiglio,
per lo remunerar ch'è altrettanto.

[43] Dei cinque che mi fan cerchio per ciglio,
colui che più al becco mi s'accosta,
la vedovella consolò del figlio:

[46] ora conosce quanto caro costa
non seguir Cristo, per l'esperienza
di questa dolce vita ede l'opposta.

[49] E quel che segue in la circonferenza
di che ragiono, per l'arco superno,
morte indugiò per vera penitenza:

[52] ora conosce che 'l giudicioeterno
non si trasmuta, quando degno preco
fa crastino là giù de l'odierno.

[55] L'altro che segue, con le leggi e meco,
sotto buona intenzion che fé mal frutto,
per cedere al pastor si fece greco:

[58] ora conosce come il mal dedutto
dal suo bene operar non li è nocivo,
avvegna che sia 'l mondo indi distrutto.

[61] E quel che vedi ne l'arco declivo,
Guiglielmo fu, cui quella terra plora
che piagne Carlo e Federigo vivo:

[64] ora conosce come s'innamora
lo ciel del giusto rege, e al semblante
del suo fulgore il fa vedere ancora.

[67] Chi crederebbe giù nel mondo errante
che Rifeo Troiano in questo tondo

fosse la quinta de le luci sante?

[70] Ora conosce assai di quel che 'l mondo
veder non può de la divina grazia,
ben che sua vista non discerna il fondo.'

[73] Quale allodetta che 'n aere si spazia
prima cantando, e poi tace contenta
de l'ultima dolcezza che la sazia,

[76] tal mi semiò l'imgo de la 'mprenta
de l'eterno piacere, al cui disio
ciascuna cosa qual ell' è diventa.

[79] E avvegna ch'io fossi al dubbiar mio
lì quasi vetro a lo color ch'el veste,
tempo aspettar tacendo non patio,

[82] ma de la bocca, 'Che cose son queste?'
mi pinse con la forza del suo peso:
per ch'io di coruscar vidi gran feste.

[85] Poi appresso, con l'occhio più acceso,
lo benedetto segno mi rispuose
per non tenermi in ammirar sospeso:

[88] 'Io veggio che tu credi queste cose
perch' io le dico, ma non vedi come;
sì che, se son credute, sono ascose.

[91] Fai come quei che la cosa per nome
apprende ben, ma la sua quiditate
veder non può se altri non la prome.

[94] *Regnum celorum* violenza pate
da caldo amore eda viva speranza,
che vince la divina volontate:

[97] non a guisa che l'omo a l'om sobranza,
ma vince lei perché vuole esser vinta,
e, vinta, vince con sua beninanza.

[100] La prima vita del ciglio e la quinta
ti fa maravigliar, perché ne vedi
la region de li angeli dipinta.

[103] D'i corpi suoi non uscir, come credi,
Gentili, ma Cristiani, in ferma fede
quel d'i passuri equal d'i passi piedi.

[106] Ché l'una de lo 'nferno, u' non si riede
già mai a buon voler, tornò a l'ossa;
e cià di viva spene fu mercede:

[109] di viva spene, che mise la possa
ne' prieghi fatti a Dio per suscitarla,
sì che potesse sua voglia esser mossa.

[112] L'anima gloriosa onde si parla,
tornata ne la carne, in che fu poco,
credette in lui che potea aiutarla;

[115] e credendo s'accese in tanto foco
di vero amor, ch'a la morte seconda
fu degna di venire a questo gioco.

[118] L'altra, per grazia che da sì profonda
fontana stilla, che mai creatura
non pinse l'occhio infino a la prima onda,

[112] tutto suo amor là giù pose a drittura:
per che, di grazia in grazia, Dio li aperse
l'occhio a la nostra redenzion futura;

[124] ond' ei credette in quella, enon sofferse
da indi il puzzo più del paganesmo;
e riprendiene le genti perverse.

[127] Quelle tre donne li fur per battesimo
che tu vedesti da la destra rota,
dinanzi al battezzar più d'un millesmo.

[130] O predestinazion, quanto remota
è la radice tua da quelli aspetti
che la prima cagion non veggion *tota*!

[133] E voi, mortali, tenetevi stretti
a giudicar: ché noi, che Dio vedemo,
non conosciamo ancor tutti li eletti;

[136] ed ène dolce così fatto scemo,
perché il ben nostro in questo ben s'affina,
che quel che vole Iddio, enoi volemo.'

[139] Così da quella imagine divina,
per farmi chiara la mia corta vista,
data mi fu soave medicina.

[142] E come a buon cantor buon citarista

fa seguitar lo guizzo de la corda,
in che più di piacer lo canto acquista,
[145] sì, mentre ch'e' parlò, sì mi ricorda
ch'io vidi le due luci benedette,
pur come batter d'occhi si concorda,
[148] con le parole mover le fiammette.

CANTO 20

[1] When he whose flame casts light round all the world
goes down and leaves our northern hemisphere –
and daylight therefore fades throughout these parts –

[4] the sky, once lighted by the sun alone,
seems suddenly made new by many flares,
reflections kindled from that single source.

[7] These movements of our sky here came to mind
as now the world's great sign – true guide of kings –
fell silent at its blessed raptor-beak.

[10] For all those lights, so vividly alive,
shining more brightly still, began a song
that glides like falling leaves from memory.

[13] Love, which in laughter sweetly clothes itself,
how ardent in those piercing pipes you burned,
voiced by the breath of holy thoughts alone.

[16] When all those lucid and so precious gems
with which, I saw, the sixth great light was set
ad brought to silence their angelic peal,

[19] I heard, it seemed, the murmur of a river,
falling from rock to rock in limpid streams
that show the swelling richness of its source.

[22] Compare: guitar notes sound from where the fret
gets pressed – as, likewise, at its apertures
a reedy flute when pierced by breaths of wind.

[25] So here, the moment of delay now done,
that murmur, as in hollow columns, rose
through all the length of this great Eagle's neck.

[28] It formed there as a voice and, through the bill,
the phrases came, in words which I, at heart –
where I inscribed them all – was waiting for.

[31] 'This,' it began, 'is now required of you,
to look, eyes fixed, upon that part of me
that sees, in earthly eagles, yet endures the sun.

[34] Of all the fires from which I frame my form,

those sparks that make the eye shine in my head
appear as highest of the many grades.

[37]* There, at the centre of the pupil, see
David, the singer of the Holy Ghost,
who bore the Ark of God from place to place.

[40] And now he knows the merit of his song –
as far as his own thought produced such verse –
here seeing how he's paid in equal kind.

[43] Then, of those five whose circle forms my brow,
he who is closest to my bill's high bridge
consoled the widow for her murdered son.

[46] And now he knows how great a price is paid
by those who aren't by choice Christ's followers.
He's known life's sweetness and its contrary.

[49] The one who's next in that circumference –
forming, I mean, around the upper brow –
made death, by his true penitence, come slow.

[52] And now he knows eternal justice stands,
and does not alter when a worthy prayer
down there procrastinates quotidian things.

[55] There follows next the one who, though his aims
were good, brought forth bad fruit, surrendering –
now Greek – with Law and Eagle-signs to Popes.

[58] And here he knows that, though the world is wrecked,
the ill deriving from his well-meant act
has here for him no baneful consequence.

[61] The one you see in that declining arc
was William, long-lamented by the land
that weeps that Charles lives still – and Frederick, too.

[64] And here he knows what love this heaven feels
for righteous kings, and here he still displays
that understanding by his brilliant light.

[67] And who, in that erroneous world down there,
would ever think that Trojan Ripheus
as fifth within that round of holy lights?

[70] Here, he now knows far more about God's grace –
although his vision does not pierce the depths –

than any in the earthly world can see.'

[73] A lark, as first it mounts through airy space,
soars upward singing but is silent then,
flush with the sweetness of its highest reach.

[76] So, too, it seemed, that image of the print
of everlasting joy, at whose desire
each thing becomes what truly each thing is.

[79] And though, in what I meant to ask, I was,
maybe, as glass that shows the hue it clothes,
these doubts could bear no silent waiting time,

[82] but forced from my tensed lips: 'What is all this?'
with all their weight and gathered impetus.

At which I saw a fête of coruscations.

[85] And after – as its eye burned brighter still –
that blessed sign then gave me its reply,
so I'd not hang there long in wonderment.

[88] 'I see that you, because I say these things,
believe they're so and yet cannot see why,
so these are hidden even though believed.

[91] You act like someone who may know quite well
the name but not the essence of a thing,
unless by demonstration made to see.

[94]**Regnum celorum* will submit to force
assailed by warmth of love or living hope,
which overcome the claims of God's own will,

[97] not in the manner that men beat down men
but win because will wishes to be won
and, won, wills all with all its own good will.

[100] The first life and the fifth that mark this brow
cause you to wonder. You're amazed to see
the realm of angels painted with these lights.

[103] They left their bodies, *contra* your belief,
as Christian souls, not Gentiles, firm in faith
that His feet paced to past or coming pain.

[106] Trajan from Hell – from where, to exercise
good will no soul returns – came back to bone,
this mercy granted him for living hope.

[109] For living hope committed all its powers
in prayer to God to raise him up once more,
so that he could, in will, be made to move.

[112] The glorious soul that we're now speaking of,
returning even briefly to his flesh,
elieved in Him whose power could bring him aid,

[115] and, so believing, blazed forth in such fires
of love in truth that he, on second death,
as fit to make his way to this great game.

[118] The other, by that grace which drops like dew –
its source so deep that no created eye
can ever penetrate the primal wave –

[121] set all its love, down there, on righteousness.
God, therefore, opened Ripheus's eyes,
grace upon grace, to when we'd be redeemed.

[124] In that redemption, he believed. And so
he did not suffer any pagan stench,
but stood as a reproof to those who strayed.

[127]*Those three pure *donne* from the right-hand wheel
which you saw once were his as baptism,
thousand years before baptizing came.

[130] Predestination! How remote your root
from all those faces that, in looking up,
cannot *in toto* see the primal cause!

[133] And so you mortals, in your judgements show
restraint. For even we who look on God
do not yet know who all the chosen are.

[136] Yet this deficiency for us is sweet.
For in this good our own good finds its goal,
that what God wills we likewise seek in will.'

[139] So from that sacred sign was given me,
to bring to my short sight new clarity,
a gentle draught of soothing medicine.

[142] As good guitarists with good singers make
the string vibrate in answer to the beat,
because of which the song gains more delight,

[145] so as it spoke, as I recall to mind,

I saw the lights of those two blessed souls,
concordant as the flickering of our eyes,
[148] move at these words the bright sparks of their flames

Canto 21

[1] Già eran li occhi miei rifissi al volto
de la mia donna, e l'animo con essi,
e da ogne altro intento s'era tolto.

[4] E quella non ridea; ma 'S'io ridessi',
mi cominciò, 'tu ti faresti quale
fu Semelè quando di cener fessi:

[7] chè la bellezza mia, che per le scale
de l'eterno palazzo' più s'accende,
com' hai veduto, quanto più si sale,

[10] se non si temperasse, tanto splende,
che 'l tuo mortal podere, al suo fulgore,
sarebbe fronda che trono scoscende.

[13] Noi sem levati al settimo splendore,
che sotto 'l petto del Leone ardente
raggia mo misto giù del suo valore.

[16] Ficca di retro a li occhi tuoi la mente,
e fa di quelli specchi a la figura
che 'n questo specchio ti sarà parvente.'

[19] Qual sapesse qual era la pastura
del viso mio ne l'aspetto beato
quand' io mi trasmutai ad altra cura,

[22] conoscerebbe quanto m'era a grato
ubidire a la mia celeste scorta,
contrapesando l'un con l'altro lato.

[25] Dentro al cristallo che 'l vocabol porta,
cerchiando il mondo, del suo caro duce
sotto cui giacque ogne malizia morta,

[28] di color d'oro in che raggio traluce
vid' io uno scaleo eretto in suso
tanto, che nol seguiva la mia luce.

[31] Vidi anche per li gradi scender giuso

tanti splendor, ch'io pensai ch'ogne lume
che par nel ciel, quindi fosse diffuso.

[34] E come, per lo natural costume,
le pole insieme, al cominciar del giorno,
si movono a scaldar le fredde piume;

[37] poi altre vanno via senza ritorno,
altre rivolgon sé onde son mosse,
e altre roteando fan soggiorno;

[40] tal modo parve me che quivi fosse
in quello sfavillar che 'nsieme venne,
sì come in certo grado si percosse.

[43] E quel che presso più ci si ritenne,
si fè sì chiaro, ch'io dicea pensando:
'Io veggio ben l'amor che tu m'accenne.

[46] Ma quella ond' io aspetto il come e 'l quando
del dire e del tacer, si sta; ond' io,
contra 'l disio, fo ben ch'io non dimando.'

[49] Per ch'ella, che vedea il tacër mio
nel veder di colui che tutto vede,
mi disse: 'Solvi il tuo caldo disio.'

[52] E io incominciai: 'La mia mercede
non mi fa degno de la tua risposta;
ma per colei che 'l chieder mi concede,

[55] vita beata che ti stai nascosta
dentro a la tua letizia, fammi nota
la cagion che sì presso mi t'ha posta;

[58] e dé perche si tace in questa rota
la dolce sinfonia di paradiso,
che giù per l'altre suona sì divota.'

[61] 'Tu hai l'udir mortal sì come il viso,'
rispuose a me; 'onde qui non si canta
per quel che Beatrice non ha riso.

[64] Giù per li gradi de la scala santa
discesi tanto sol per farti festa
col dire e con la luce che mi ammantà;

[67] nè più amor mi fece esser più presta,
chè più e tanto amor quinci sù ferve,

sì come il fiammeggiar ti manifesta.

[70] Ma l'alta carita, che ci fa serve
pronte al consiglio che 'l mondo governa,
sorteggia qui sì come tu osserve.'

[73] 'Io veggio ben', diss' io, 'sacra lucerna,
come libero amore in questa corte
basta a seguir la provedenza etterna;

[76] ma questo è quel ch'a cerner mi par forte,
perchè predestinata fosti sola
a questo officio tra le tue consorte.'

[79] Nè venni prima a l'ultima parola,
che del suo mezzo fece il lume centro,
girando sè come veloce mola;

[82] poi rispuose l'amor che v'era dentro:
'Luce divina sopra me s'appunta,
penetrando per questa in ch'io m'inventro,

[85] la cui virtù, col mio veder congiunta,
mi leva sopra me tanto, ch'i' veggio
la somma essenza de la quale è munta.

[88] Quinci vien l'allegrezza ond' io fiammeggio;
per ch'a la vista mia, quant' ella è chiara,
la chiarità de la fiamma pareggio.

[91] Ma quell' alma nel ciel che più si schiara,
quel serafin che 'n Dio più l'occhio ha fisso,
a la dimanda tua non satisfara,

[94] però che sì s'innoltra ne lo abisso
de l'eterno statuto quel che chiedi,
che da ogni creata vista è scisso.

[97] E al mondo mortal, quando tu riedi,
questo rapporta, sì che non presuma
a tanto segno più mover li piedi.

[100] La mente, che qui luce, in terra fumma;
onde riguarda come può là giùe
quel che non pote perché 'l ciel l'assumma.'

[103] Sì mi prescrisser le parole sue,
ch'io lasciai la quistione e mi ritrassi
a dimandarla umilmente chi fue.

[106] ‘Tra ’ due liti d’Italia surgon sassi,
e non molto distanti a la tua patria,
tanto che ’ troni assai suonan più bassi,

[109] e fanno un gibbo che si chiama Catria,
di sotto al quale è consecrato un ermo,
che suole esser disposto a sola latria.’

[112] Così ricominciommi il terzo sermo;
e poi, continuando, disse: ‘Quivi
al servizio di Dio mi fe’ sì fermo,

[115] che pur con cibi di liquor d’ulivi
lievemente passava caldi e geli,
contento ne’ pensier contemplativi.

[118] Render solea quel chiostro a questi cieli
fertilmente; e ora è fatto vano,
sì che tosto convien che si riveli.

[121] In quel loco fu’ io Pietro Damiano,
e Pietro Peccator fu’ ne la casa
di Nostra Donna in sul lito adriano.

[124] Poca vita mortal m’era rimasa,
quando fui chiesto e tratto a quel cappello,
che pur di male in peggio si travasa.

[127] Venne Cefàs e venne il gran vasello
de lo Spirito Santo, magri e scalzi,
prendendo il cibo da qualunque ostello.

[130] Or voglion quinci e quindi chi rincalzi
li moderni pastori e chi li meni,
tanto son gravi, e chi di dietro li alzi.

[133] Cuopron d’i manti loro i palafreni,
sì che due bestie van sott’ una pelle:
oh pazienza che tanto sostieni!’

[136] A questa voce vid’ io più fiammelle
di grado in grado scendere e girarsi,
e ogni giro le facea più belle.

[139] Dintorno a questa vennero e fermarsi,
e fero un grido di sì alto suono,
che non potrebbe qui assomigliarsi;

[142] nè io lo ’ntesi, sì mi vinse il tuono.

CANTO 21

[1] Now once again my eyes were fixed upon
my *donna*'s countenance, and drawn away,
with all my thoughts, from any other aim.

[4]*She did not smile. But: 'If I were to smile,'
so she began, 'you would become what once
Semele was, when she was turned to ash.

[7] For if my beauty (which, as you have seen,
burns yet more brightly as it climbs the stair
that carries us through this eternal hall)

[10] were not now tempered, it would shine so clear
that all within your mortal power would be
a sprig, as this flash struck, shaken by thunder.

[13]*We're lifted to the seventh splendour now,
which here, beneath the fiery Lion's breast,
combines its rays, in brave strength, with that sign.

[16] Fix your mind firm behind those eyes of yours,
and make them both a mirror for the form
that in *this* mirror will appear to you.'

[19] Whoever knows the pasture, for themselves,
that my eyes grazed on in that blessed sight,
when once I'd altered to that other care,

[22] will recognize the pleasure that I took
in bowing down to that celestial guide,
weighing consent against the sight of her.

[25]*Within the crystal, circling round the world,
which bears the etymon of that dear lord –
under whose sway all evil thoughts lie dead,

[28] I saw, as gold in which a ray shines through,
a ladder stretching upwards – and so far –
my eye-lights could not follow where it led.

[31] I also saw descending, rung by rung,
so many brilliancies that every flare
the sky displays I thought was flowing down.

[34] Compare: jackdaws, by instinct, as the day

first breaks, will flock and stir their wings, as one,
to bring some warmth once more to icy plumes.

[37] Then some will make away and not return,
while others *do* go back from where they'd come,
and some will stay and wheel round that same spot.

[40] In just that way, these sparks appeared to me,
combining in their scintillating showers
as each one struck upon a certain step.

[43] The light, then, tightest at our side, shone out
so clear that, thinking to myself, I said:

'I see full well what love you show to me.

[46] But she from whom I wait to hear the "when"
of silence and of speech, and "how", stays still.
Against my will, it's well that I don't ask.'

[49] So she who saw my silence in the sight
of Him who sees the all of everything
said now: 'Unloose the knot of warm desire.'

[52] 'No merit I may claim,' so I began,
'can make me fit to hear what you will say.
But, for the sake of her who lets me ask,

[55] make known to me, you happy living soul,
hiding within the heart of your own joy,
the reason you have set yourself so near me.

[58] And tell me why the symphony
of Paradise, which sounds in sweet devotion
through the other spheres, is muted in this wheel.'

[61] 'In hearing, you are mortal, as in sight.
So, just as Beatrice does not smile,
likewise,' he answered me, 'there's no song here.

[64] I have descended down the holy stair
as far as this to bring you only joy,
with speech and with the light that mantles me.

[67] Nor does more love to you make me more quick.
For that same love, and more, seethes upwards here
as all this flaming-out displays to you.

[70] But *caritas* on high that makes us serve
so readily the wisdom of the spheres

allots the places here as you observe.'

[73] 'I truly see,' I said, 'O sacred light,
how love – the freedom of this holy court –
is all one needs to trace God's providence.

[76] But this, for me, seems hard to penetrate:
why, among those who share your destiny,
are you alone predestined to this task?'

[79] Nor had I reached the last of all these words
when that light took its centre as a hub,
spinning around itself as grindstones do.

[82] The love within it then replied to me:
'Divine light drives its point upon me here.
And, penetrating that in which I'm wombed,

[85] its virtue, joined with my own powers of sight,
lifts me so high above myself, I see
on high the essence where that light is milked.

[88] Hence comes the brightening joy in which I flame.
Equal to what I see in clarity
is this clear flame that I myself display.

[91] But still the soul in Heaven that brightens most –
that seraph with its eye fixed most in God –
could never satisfy your last demand.

[94] For what you ask so in-beyonds itself
within the chasm of divine decree,
it's cut off wholly from a creature's sight.

[97] And so when you return to mortal things,
bear this with you, so none there may presume
to move their feet to any suchlike aim.

[100] Minds that shine here, on earth give off mere smoke.
So just consider whether those down there
could do what, raised to Heaven, no mind can do.'

[103] His words so cut and limited my thoughts
that I gave up the question, holding back,
to ask him, very humbly, who he was.

[106]*-'Between the littorals of Italy
not far from your own fatherland, hard rocks
surge up so high the thunder sounds beneath.

[109] These form a hunchback ridge called Catria.
Below that lies a consecrated cell
devoted, once, to God's unending praise.'

[112] So he began for me his third address,
and then, continuing: 'Here I remained
so steadfast in the service of our Lord –

[115] oil, simply, of the olive dressed my food –
that I lived lightly through both heat and chill,
contented with contemplative intent.

[118] That cloister once would render to the skies
a fertile crop, but now – and this will soon
be all revealed – is hollow, empty, vain.

[121]*In that place, I was Peter Damian,
and otherwise, within Our Lady's house,
Peter the Sinner on the Adriatic shore.

[124] Little, for me, of mortal life remained
when I was called and forced to wear the gear
that's handed down, these days, from bad to worse.

[127]*Once Cephas came – as did that vessel, too,
of Holy Inspiration – shoeless, lean,
taking their meals in any mere hotel.

[130] Our modern pastors, though, have put on weight.
They need some propping up on either side,
someone to hoist their backsides up, or lead.

[133] The robes they dress in cloak their steeds as well,
so two beasts go within a single skin.
What patience, God! to bear a sight like that.'

[136] I saw, as this was said, more little flames,
ascending and revolving, step by step,
more beautiful at every turn they took.

[139] They came and circled round this soul, then stopped,
and gave a cry so piercing in its sound
that nothing here on earth could equal it.

[142] And, thunderstruck, I did not understand.

Canto 22

[1] Oppresso di stupore, a la mia guida
mi volsi, come parvol che ricorre
sempre colà dove più si confida;

[4] e quella, come madre che soccorre
sùbito al figlio palido e anelo
con la sua voce, che 'l suol ben disporre,

[7] mi disse: 'Non sai tu che tu se' in cielo?
e non sai tu che 'l cielo è tutto santo,
e ciò che ci si fa vien da buon zelo?

[10] Come t'avrebbe trasmutato il canto,
e io ridendo, mo pensar lo puoi,
poscia che 'l grido t'ha mosso cotanto;

[13] nel qual, se 'nteso avessi i prieghi suoi,
già ti sarebbe nota la vendetta
che tu vedrai innanzi che tu muoi.

[16] La spada di qua sù non taglia in fretta
nè tardo, ma' ch'al parer di colui
che disiando o temendo l'aspetta.

[19] Ma rivolgiti omai inverso altrui;
ch'assai illustri spiriti vedrai,
se com' io dico Paspetto redui.'

[22] Come a lei piacque, li occhi ritornai,
e vidi cento sperule che 'nsieme
più s'abbellivan con mutui rai.

[25] Io stava come quei che 'n sè repreme
la punta del disio, e non s'attenta
di domandar, sì del troppo si teme;

[28] e la maggiore e la più luculenta
di quelle margherite innanzi fessi,
per far di sè la mia voglia contenta.

[31] Poi dentro a lei udi': 'Se tu vedessi

com' io la carita che tra noi arde,
li tuoi concetti sarebbero espressi.

[34] Ma perchè tu, aspettando, non tarde
a l'alto fine, io ti farò risposta
pur al pensier, da che s'è ti riguarde.

[37] Quel monte a cui Cassino è ne la costa
fu frequentato già in sù la cima
da la gente ingannata e mal disposta;

[40] e quel son io che s'è vi portai prima
lo nome di colui che 'n terra addusse
la verità che tanto ci soblima;

[43] e tanta grazia sopra me relusse,
ch'io ritrassi le ville circostanti
da l'empio coltò che 'l mondo sedusse.

[46] Questi altri fuochi tutti contemplanti
uomini fuoro, accesi di quel caldo
che fa nascere i fiori e' frutti santi.

[49] Qui è Maccario, qui è Romoaldo,
qui son li frati miei che dentro ai chiostri
fermar li piedi e tennero il cor saldo.'

[52] E io a lui: 'L'affetto che dimostri
meco parlando, e la buona sembianza
ch'io veggio e noto in tutti li ardor vostri,

[55] cos' m'ha dilatata mia fidanza,
come 'l sol fa la rosa quando aperta
tanto divien quant' ell' ha di possanza.

[58] Però ti priego, e tu, padre, m'accerta
s'io posso prender tanta grazia, ch'io
ti veggia con imagine scoperta.'

[61] Ond' elli: 'Frate, il tuo alto disio
s'adempiera in sù Pultima spera,
ove s'adempion tutti li altri e 'l mio.

[64] Ivi è perfetta, matura e intera
ciascuna disianza; in quella sola
è ogni parte là ove sempr' era,

[67] perchè non è in loco e non s'impola;
e nostra scala infino ad essa varca,

onde così dal viso ti s'invola.

[70] Infin là sù la vide il patriarca
Iacobbe porger la superna parte,
quando li apparve d'angeli sì carica.

[73] Ma, per salirla, mo nessun diparte
da terra i piedi, e la regola mia
rimasa è per danno de le carte.

[76] Le mura che solieno esser badia
fatte sono spelonche, e le cocolle
sacca son piene di farina ria.

[79] Ma grave usura tanto non si tolle
contra 'l piacer di Dio, quanto quel frutto
che fa il cor de' monaci sì folle;

[82] chè quantunque la Chiesa guarda, tutto
è de la gente che per Dio dimanda;
non di parenti nè d'altro più brutto.

[85] La carne d'i mortali è tanto blanda,
che giù non basta buon cominciamento
dal nascer de la quercia al far la ghianda.

[88] Pier cominiciò sanz' oro e sanz' argento,
e io con orazione e con digiuno,
e Francesco umilmente il suo convento;

[91] e se guardi 'l principio di ciascuno,
poscia riguardi là dov' è trascorso,
tu vederai del bianco fatto bruno.

[94] Veramente Iordan vòlto retrorso
più fu, e 'l mar fuggir, quando Dio volse,
mirabile a veder che qui 'l soccorso.'

[97] Così mi disse, e indi si raccolse
al suo collegio, e 'l collegio si strinse;
poi, come turbo, in sù tutto s'avvolse.

[100] La dolce donna dietro a lor mi pinse
con un sol cenno sù per quella scala,
sì sua virtù la mia natura vinse;

[103] nè mai qua giù dove si monta e cala
naturalmente, fu sì ratto moto
ch'agguagliar si potesse a la mia ala.

[106] S'io torni mai, lettore, a quel divoto
trionfo per lo quale io piango spesso
le mie peccata e 'l petto mi percuoto,

[109] tu non avresti in tanto tratto e messo
nel foco il dito, in quant' io vidi 'l segno
che segue il Tauro e fui dentro da esso.

[112] O gloriose stelle, o lume pregno
di gran virtù, dal quale io riconosco
tutto, qual che si sia, il mio ingegno,

[115] con voi nasceva e s'ascondeva vosco
quelli ch'è padre d'ogne mortal vita,
quand' io senti' di prima l'aere tosco;

[118] e poi, quando mi fu grazia largita
d'entrar ne l'alta rota che vi gira,
la vostra region mi fu sortita.

[121] A voi divotamente ora sospira
l'anima mia, per acquistar virtute
al passo forte che a sè la tira.

[124] 'Tu se' sì presso a l'ultima salute,'
cominciò Beatrice, 'che tu dei
aver le luci tue chiare e acute;

[127] e però, prima che tu più t'inlei,
rimira in giù, e vedi quanto mondo
sotto li piedi già esser ti fei;

[130] sì che 'l tuo cor, quantunque può, giocondo
s'appresenti a la turba triunfante
che lieta vien per questo etera tondo.'

[133] Col viso ritornai per tutte quante
le sette spere, e vidi questo globo
tal, ch'io sorrisi del suo vil sembiante;

[136] e quel consiglio per migliore approbo
che l'ha per meno; e chi ad altro pensa
chiamar si puote veramente probo.

[139] Vidi la figlia di Latona incensa
sanza quell' ombra che mi fu cagione
per che già la credetti rara e densa.

[142] L'aspetto del tuo nato, Iperione,

quivi sostenni, e vidi com' si move
circa e vicino a lui Maia e Dione.

[145] Quindi m'apparve il temperar di Giove
tra 'l padre e 'l figlio; e quindi mi fu chiaro
il variar che fanno di lor dove;

[148] e tutti e sette mi si dimostraro
quanto son grandi e quanto son veloci
e come sono in distante riparo.

[151] L'aiuola che ci fa tanto feroci,
volgendom' io con li etterni Gemelli,
tutta m'apparve da' colli a le foci;

[154] poscia rivolsi li occhi a li occhi belli.

CANTO 22

[1] Astounded, overwhelmed, I turned to her,
my constant guide, like any little boy
who'll run to where his greatest trust is found.

[4] And rushing there, as mothers always do,
with words to help and set once more to rights
her shocked, pale, sobbing son, she said to me:

[7] 'Do you not know that you're in Heaven now?
Or know the heavens are holy everywhere,
and all that here is done is done from zeal?

[10] Just think of this: how much that song and I,
win smiling, would have wrought in you a change
when you are so much moved by that great cry –

[13] in which, if you had understood their prayers,
you might have heard the vengeance clearly sung
that you will come to see before your death.

[16] That sword raised here will strike, though not in haste,
nor yet too slow, save only in the view
of those who wait in fear or keen desire.

[19] But now turn round to look on other souls.
If, as I ask, you turn your face to these,
you'll see the shining honour of their hearts.'

[22] Once more, as she desired, I turned my eyes,
and saw a hundred bright particular spheres
that all grew lovelier in their mutual rays.

[25] So there I stood, like someone driving back
the point of his desire within himself,
not daring out of fear to question more.

[28] And now the fullest of those orient pearls,
most brilliant in its lustre, made to come
and make my will content with what it was.

[31] Within, I heard: 'Were you to see, as I,
the *caritas* that burns among us here,
you would by now have pressed your thoughts to voice.

[34] But lest, in pausing, you too long defer

the road to your high goal, I'll make reply
directly to your thought, since that's your care.

[37] The mountain on whose sides Cassino is
was thickly peopled round its summit once
by tribes, deluded, of a stubborn strain.

[40] And I am he who bore first to that height
the name of Him who carried down to earth
the truth that bears us to transcendent realms.

[43] And grace to that extent shone down on me
that I retrieved the townships all around
from false devotions that seduce the world.

[46] These other fires were all contemplatives,
men brightly kindled by the ardent warmth
that brings to birth the holy flowers and fruit.

[49]*Maccario is here; Romoaldo here.
Here are my brothers, who within the cloister
steadied their steps and kept their hearts entire.'

[52] And I to him: 'The feeling you display
in speaking thus to me, the looks
I note so well-disposed in you, and all these fires,

[55] have caused in me my trust to open wide
as sun does to the rose when this becomes
as fully open as its power can be.

[58] Therefore I pray, do, Father, make me sure
that I may come to take such grace that I
might see your face, uncovered, as you are.'

[61] At which, he said: 'Brother, your high desire
will be fulfilled within the final sphere,
where all desires, as mine too, are fulfilled.

[64] All our desiring is perfected there,
complete and fruitful in that sphere alone
where every part is where all parts have been.

[67] For that is no mere place. It has no pole.
Our ladder, rising, spans across to that,
and therefore steals in flight away from view.

[70] Up there, to where its highest part extends,
the Patriarch beheld it all – Jacob

who saw the angels loading all its length.

[73] But no one lifts their feet, now, from the earth
to climb those rungs. My Rule remains a waste
of all the vellum that it's copied on.

[76] The walls that once encircled abbey grounds
are turned to dens and lairs. Monastic cowls
are bursting sacks stuffed full with rotten flour.

[79] But even usury at its worst does not
distract so much from all that God finds good
as that fruit does, which maddens monks at heart.

[82] For everything the Church is there to guard
belongs to those who ask it in God's name.
It is not meant for kinsmen – worse still, brutes.

[85] The flesh of mortals runs to yielding flab.
So good beginnings aren't enough to last
to acorn time from when the oak is born.

[88] Peter began – no silver and no gold! –
as I did, too, with fasting and with prayers.
And Francis built his order on humility.

[91] But if you look where each of these began,
and then consider where their track has run,
you'll see the white original turned dark.

[94]* And yet, to see the Jordan turning back
or, as God willed, the ocean flee apart
is more miraculous than God's aid here.'

[97] All this he said, and then once more drew back
to join his cell, and that cell tightened in.
And then, as whirlwinds do, it spiralled up.

[100] My sweetest lady with a single sign –
the powers she had so vanquished what I was –
drove me to mount the ladder after them.

[103] Nor where, in natural terms, we climb or sink
is any motion ever swift enough
to match the speed of what my wings could do.

[106] So may I, reader, sometime join once more
that prayerful march of victory (for which
I often weep my sins and beat my breast),

[109] you'd not so swiftly have withdrawn and thrust
your finger in the fire as I first saw
the sign that follows Taurus... and was in!

[112] You stars in glory! Light enwombing here
those virtuous powers from which, I recognize,
whatever talents that are mine derive,

[115] with you, the father of all mortal life
was born, conjoined, then hidden in your span,
when first I felt the bite of Tuscan air.

[118] And then when, free and wide, grace granted me
high entry to the wheel that turns your sphere,
yours was the region here allotted me.

[121] My soul in all devotion breathes to you,
seeking from you the virtue and the strength
to meet the test the heavens now draw it to.

[124] 'You are so close,' so Beatrice said,
'to your salvation here that you must keep
the light within your eye acute and clear.

[127] And so, before you further "in" yourself,
look down and wonder at how great a world
already you have set beneath your feet,

[130] so that your heart may show itself, as full
as it may be, to this triumphant throng
that rings in happiness the ethereal round.'

[133] I turned about to look once more through all
the seven spheres and, seeing there the globe,
I smiled to find how small and cheap it seemed.

[136] I thoroughly approve as best the thought
that earth is least. Those, then, who set their minds
on other things are known as right and able.

[139]*I saw, on fire, the daughter of Latona,
free of the shadow that had made me once
believe the moon to be both rare and dense.

[142]*I now could bear, Hyperion, the look
of your bright son. I saw there movements, too –
Dione, Maia – that were circling near.

[145] And there, between his sire and son, appeared

the tempering influence of Jupiter
and, clear to view, the varying 'where' of each.

[148] And all these seven spheres displayed to me
their magnitude, their speed, the distance, too,
that lay between the dwelling place of each.

[151] That little threshing floor that makes men fierce,
myself now turning with the eternal Twins,
was seen entire – to river-mouths from hills.

[154] My eyes I then turned back to her fine eyes.

Canto 23

[1] Come l'augello, intra l'amate fronde,
posato al nido de' suoi dolci nati
la notte che le cose ci nasconde,

[4] che, per veder li aspetti disati
e per trovar lo cibo onde li pasca,
in che gravi labor li sono aggrati,

[7] previene il tempo in sù aperta frasca,
e con ardente affetto il sole aspetta,
fiso guardando pur che l'alba nasca;

[10] così la donna mia stava eretta
e attenta, rivolta inver' la plaga
sotto la quale il sol mostra men fretta:

[13] sì che, veggendola io sospesa e vaga,
fecimi qual è quei che disiando
altro vorria, e sperando s'appaga.

[16] Ma poco fu tra uno e altro quando,
del mio attender, dico, e del vedere
lo ciel venir più e più rischiarando;

[19] e Beatrice disse: 'Ecco le schiere
del trionfo di Cristo e tutto 'l frutto
ricolto del girar di queste spere!'

[22] Pariemi che 'l suo viso ardesse tutto,
e li occhi avea di letizia sì pieni,
che passarmen convien senza costrutto.

[25] Quale ne' plenilunii sereni
Trivia ride tra le ninfe etterne
che dipingon lo ciel per tutti i seni,

[28] vid' i' sopra migliaia di lucerne
un sol che tutte quante l'accendea,
come fa 'l nostro le viste superne;

[31] e per la viva luce trasparea

la lucente sustanza tanto chiara
nel viso mio, che non la sostenea.

[34] Oh Beatrice, dolce guida e cara!
Ella mi disse: 'Quel che ti sobranza
è virtù da cui nulla si ripara.

[37] Quivi è la sapienza e la possanza
ch'aprì le strade tra 'l cielo e la terra,
onde fu già sì lunga disianza.'

[40] Come foco di nube si diserra
per dilatarsi sì che non vi cape,
e fuor di sua natura in giù s'atterra,

[43] la mente mia così, tra quelle dape
fatta più grande, di sé stessa uscìo,
e che si fesse rimembrar non sape.

[46] 'Apri li occhi e riguarda qual son io;
tu hai vedute cose, che possente
se' fatto a sostener lo riso mio.'

[49] Io era come quei che si risente
di visione oblita e che s'ingegna
indarno di ridurlasi a la mente,

[52] quand' io udi' questa proferta, degna
di tanto grato, che mai non si stingue
del libro che 'l preterito rassegna.

[55] Se mo sonasser tutte quelle lingue
che Polimnia con le suore fero
del latte lor dolcissimo più pingue,

[58] per aiutarmi, al millesmo del vero
non si verria, cantando il santo riso
e quanto il santo aspetto facea mero;

[61] e così, figurando il paradiso,
convien saltar lo sacrato poema,
come chi trova suo cammin riciso.

[64] Ma chi pensasse il ponderoso tema
e l'omero mortal che se ne carica,
nol biasmerebbe se sott' esso trema:

[67] non è pareggio da picciola barca
quel che fendendo va l'ardita prora,

nè da nocchier ch'a sé medesmo parca.

[70] 'Perché la faccia mia sì t'innamora,
che tu non ti rivolgi al bel giardino
che sotto i raggi di Cristo s'infiora?

[73] Quivi è la rosa in che 'l verbo divino
carne si fece; quivi son li gigli
al cui odor si prese il buon cammino.'

[76] Così Beatrice; e io, che a' suoi consigli
tutto era pronto, ancora mi rendei
a la battaglia de' debili cigli.

[79] Come a raggio di sol, che puro mei
per fratta nube, già prato di fiori
vider, coverti d'ombra, li occhi miei;

[82] vid' io così più turbe di splendori,
folgorate di sù da raggi ardenti,
senza veder principio di folgóri.

[85] O benigna virtù che sì li 'mprenti,
sù t'essaltasti, per largirmi loco
a li occhi lì che non t'eran possenti.

[88] Il nome del bel fior ch'io sempre invoco
e mane e sera, tutto mi ristrinse
l'animo ad avvisar lo maggior foco;

[91] e come ambo le luci mi dipinse
il quale e il quanto de la viva stella
Che là sù vince come qua giù vinse,

[94] per entro il cielo scese una facella,
formata in cerchio a guisa di corona,
cinsela e girossi intorno ad ella.

[97] Qualunque melodia più dolce suona
qua giù e più a sé l'anima tira,
parrebbe nube che squarciata tona,

[100] comparata al sonar di quella lira
onde si coronava il bel zaffiro
del quale il ciel più chiaro s'inzaffira.

[103] 'Io sono amore angelico, che giro
l'alta letizia che spira del ventre
che fu albergo del nostro disiro;

[106] e girerommi, donna del ciel, mentre
che seguirai tuo figlio, e farai dia
più la spera suprema perchè lì entre.'

[109] Così la circolata melodia
si sigillava, e tutti li altri lumi
facean sonare il nome di Maria.

[112] Lo real manto di tutti i volumi
del mondo, che più ferve e più s'avviva
ne l'alito di Dio e nei costumi,

[115] avea sopra di noi l'interna riva
tanto distante, che la sua parvenza,
là dov' io era, ancor non appariva:

[118] però non ebber li occhi miei potenza
di seguitar la coronata fiamma
che si levò appresso sua semenza.

[121] E come fantolin che 'nver' la mamma
tende le braccia, poi che 'l latte prese,
per l'animo che 'nfin di fuor s'infiamma;

[124] ciascun di quei candori in sù si stese
con la sua cima, sì che l'alto affetto
ch'elli avieno a Maria mi fu palese.

[127] Indi rimaser lì nel mio cospetto,
'*Regina coeli*' cantando sì dolce,
che mai da me non si partì 'l diletto.

[130] Oh quanta è l'ubertà che si soffolce
in quelle arche ricchissime che fuoro
a seminar qua giù buone bobolce!

[133] Quivi si vive e gode del tesoro
che s'acquistó piangendò ne lo essilio
di Babillòn, ove si lasciò l'oro.

[136] Quivi triunfa, sotto l'alto Filio
di Dio e di Maria, di sua vittoria,
e con l'antico e col novo concilio,

[\[139\]](#) colui che tien le chiavi di tal gloria.

CANTO 23

[1] Compare: a bird, among her well-loved boughs,
has rested all night long while things lie hid,
poised where her dear brood sleeps within their nest;

[4] and then, to glimpse the looks she's longed to see,
and find the food her fledglings feed upon
(these efforts weigh with her as pure delight)

[7] before dawn comes she mounts an open sprig,
and there, her heart ablaze, awaits the sun,
eyes sharpening, fixed, till day is truly born.

[10]*-So, too, head raised, tall, straight, my *donna*
attention wholly on that stretch of sky
where, under noon, the sun displays least speed.

[13] And I, to see her stand enraptured so,
became like one desiring still what he
has not – and yet in hope is satisfied.

[16] But little time went by between these two –
I mean my waiting, and my seeing now
the skies that, brightening still, grew yet more bright.

[19] And 'Look!' said Beatrice. 'Triumphing,
the soldiery of Christ, and all the yield,
brought from the orbit of the farthest spheres!'

[22] Her face, it seemed to me, now burned so bright,
her eyes so filled with utmost happiness,
that I must needs pass on and frame no word.

[25]*-As in the calm, clear skies of moonlit nights,
tri-form Diana smiles (eternal nymphs,
around her, paint all Heaven's curving spheres),

[28] above a thousand lanterns or still more,
I saw one sun that, soaring, lit them all,
as our sun lights the stars seen over us.

[31] And through this clear and living light there shone
the being that creates that glow, too bright
within my eyes for me to tolerate.

[34] My sweetness! Beatrice, guiding me!

She spoke: 'This power that overcomes your sight
is one from which no shelter can be sought.

[37]* Here is all wisdom, and the strength that cleared
the open road that runs from Heaven to earth,
for which so long was once such deep desire.'

[40] As bolts of fire, unlocked from thunder clouds,
expand beyond containment in those bounds,
then fall to ground (as fire, by nature, can't),

[43] so, too, surrounded by this solemn feast,
my own mind, grown the greater now, went forth
and can't remember what it then became.

[46] 'Open your eyes and look at what I am!
You have seen things by which you're made so strong,
you can, now, bear to look upon my smile.'

[49] I was like one whose waking sense returns
yet strives in vain – his dreaming now oblivion –
to bring once more that vision back to mind,

[52] as I now heard that utterance which deserves
a gratitude that never should be dimmed
from that great book that tells of things long past.

[55] Even if all those voices were to sound
that Polyhymnia and her sister muses
fed on their sweetest milk so richly once,

[58] and aid me, singing of that holy smile
and how her holy look grew purer still,
I'd still not reach one thousandth of the truth.

[61] And so, imagining this Paradise,
the sacred epic has to make a leap,
as when we find the road ahead cut off.

[64] Yet no one if they've gauged that weighty theme –
and seen what mortal shoulders bear the load –
would criticize such trembling backing-out.

[67] The waves that my adventurous prow here cleaves
are no mere sea-loch that some skiff might cross,
or helmsmen lacking in the proper skill.

[70] 'Why is it that my face in-loves you so
that you don't turn to see the garden where,

beneath Christ's rays, such beauty is en-flowered?

[73] *The rose in which the Word of God became
our flesh is here. And here those *fleurs-de-lys*
whose perfume marks the path we rightly tread.'

[76] So, Beatrice. And I, quick to read
whatever she might counsel, gave myself
to battle, feeble though my eyelids were.

[79] My eyes have seen at times – though wrapped in shade –
a ray of limpid sunlight, filtering
through broken cloud, across a field of flowers.

[82] So here I saw a swirling crowd of splendours
flung out like thunderbolts down burning beams,
and could not see from where these flashes came.

[85] You, Generous Strength! You leave your imprint here.
To open this arena to my eyes (powerless
to see You otherwise) You rose on high.

[88] The naming of that lovely flower which I,
at dawn and evening, call upon, compelled
my mind to face in full the greatest fire.

[91] And as my eyes, together, now portrayed
the scope and nature of that bright, live star,
victorious there, victorious here below,

[94] straight through the skies another torch came down
spun in a circle, as a crown might be,
and formed a ring around her, turning there.

[97] The sweetest melody that sounds on earth,
or that which most attracts the soul to it,
would seem like cloud ripped wide by thunder claps

[100] when heard beside the sounding of that lyre
whose notes now crowned the lovely sapphire-stone,
through whom the skies en-sapphire clearer still.

[103] 'I am the angel-love called Gabriel,
encircling here the height of joy that breathes
around the womb our Longed-for sheltered in.

[106] *Lady of Heaven, I shall spin these turns
till, in procession, you, behind your son,
make the High Sphere, on entering, more divine.'

[109] And so the perfect circling of that tune
sealed its conclusion, while the other lights
rang out the sound of Maria's name.

[112] The regal surcoat of those rolling spheres
that form our universe, alive with stars,
all shimmering at the breathing of God's rule

[115] now stretched its inner shore so far above
that nothing of it showed from where I was,
no glimpse of that First Mover came to view.

[118] Therefore my eyes could not command the power
to follow as that flame, within its crown,
rose up so close behind the seed she'd borne.

[121] A baby, suckling, once it's full of milk,
will hold its arms out wide towards its mum
to make known outwardly its inner flame.

[124] So, at their incandescent peaks, these gleams
stretched up. And this, to me, made clear what depths
of heartfelt love they bore towards Maria.

[127] *But all remained there, still within my sight,
singing in such sweet tones '*Regina coeli*'
delight at that will never leave my heart.

[130] What richness, what abundance now well-stored
within such overflowing barns – which were
good husbandmen who sowed the seed below.

[133] *Here life is lived rejoicing in that hoard,
gained ever weeping in the exile years
of Babylon, when gold was put aside.

[136] And here beneath the most exalted Son
of God and Mary, in His victory,
with all the new and all the ancient court,

[139]*triumphs the one who holds such glory's key.

Canto 24

[1] 'O sodalizio eletto a la gran cena
del benedetto Agnello, il qual vi ciba
sì, che la vostra voglia è sempre piena,

[4] se per grazia di Dio questi preliba
di quel che cade de la vostra mensa,
prima che morte tempo li prescriba,

[7] ponete mente a l'affezione immensa
e roratelo alquanto: voi bevete
sempre del fonte onde vien quel ch'ei pensa.'

[10] Così Beatrice; e quelle anime liete
si fero spere sopra fissi poli,
fiammando, a volte, a guisa di comete.

[13] E come cerchi in tempra d'oriuoli
si giran sì, che 'l primo a chi pon mente
quïeto pare, e l'ultimo che voli;

[16] così quelle carole, differente-
mente danzando, de la sua ricchezza
mi facieno stimar, veloci e lente.

[19] Di quella ch'io notai di più carezza
vid' io uscire un foco sì felice,
che nullo vi lascio di più chiarezza;

[22] e tre fiate intorno di Beatrice
si volse con un canto tanto divo,
he la mia fantasia nol mi ridice.

[25] Pero salta la penna e non lo scrivo:
ché l'immagine nostra a cotai pieghe,
non che 'l parlare, è troppo color vivo.

[28] 'O santa suora mia che sì ne prieghe
divota, per lo tuo ardente affetto
da quella bella spera mi disleghe.'

[31] Poscia fermato, il foco benedetto

a la mia donna dirizzò lo spiro,
che favellò così com' i' ho detto.

[34] Ed ella: 'O luce eterna del gran viro
a cui Nostro Segnor lascio le chiavi,
ch'ei portò giu, di questo gaudio miro,

[37] tenta costui di punti lievi e gravi,
come ti piace, intorno de la fede,
per la qual tu sù per lo mare andavi.

[40] S'elli ama bene e bene spera e crede,
non t'è occulto, perchè 'l viso hai quivi
dov' ogne cosa dipinta si vede;

[43] ma perché questo regno ha fatto civi
per la verace fede, a gloriarla,
di lei parlaré è ben ch'a lui arrivi.'

[46] Sì come il baccialier s'arma e non parla
fin che 'l maestro la question propone,
per approvarla, non per terminarla,

[49] così m'armava io d'ogne ragione
mentre ch'ella dicea, per esser presto
a tal querente e a tal professione.

[52] 'Dì, buon Cristiano, fatti manifesto:
fede che è?' Ond' io levai la fronte
in quella luce onde spirava questo;

[55] poi mi volsi a Beatrice, ed essa pronte
sembianze femmi perch' io spandessi
l'acqua di fuor del mio interno fonte.

[58] 'La Grazia che mi dà ch'io mi confessi',
comincia' io, 'da l'alto primipilo,
faccia li miei concetti bene espressi.'

[61] E seguitai: 'Come 'l verace stilo
ne scrisse, padre, del tuo caro frate
che mise teco Roma nel buon filo,

[64] fede è sustanza di cose sperate
e argomento de le non parventi;
e questa pare a me sua quiditate.'

[67] Allora udi': 'Dirittamente senti,
se bene intendi perché la ripuose

tra le sustanze, e poi tra li argomenti.’

[70] E io appresso: ‘Le profonde cose
che mi largiscon qui la lor parvenza,
a li occhi di là giù son sì ascose,

[73] che l’esser loro v’è in sola credenza,
sopra la qual si fonda l’alta spene;
e però di sustanza prende intenza.

[76] E da questa credenza ci conviene
silogizzar, sanz’ avere altra vista:
però intenza d’argomento tene.’

[79] Allora udi’: ‘Se quantunque s’acquista
giù per dottrina, fosse così ‘nteso,
non li avria loco ingegno di sofista.’

[82] Così spirò di quello amore acceso;
indi soggiunse: ‘Assai bene è trascorsa
d’esta moneta già la lega e ‘l peso;

[85] ma dimmi se tu l’hai ne la tua borsa.’
Ond’ io: ‘Sì ho, sì lucida e sì tonda,
che nel suo conio nulla mi s’inforsa.’

[88] Appresso uscì de la luce profonda
che lì splendeva: ‘Questa cara gioia
sopra la quale ogni virtù si fonda,

[91] onde ti venne?’ E io: ‘La larga ploia
de lo Spirito Santo, ch’è diffusa
in su le vecchie e ‘n su le nuove cuoia,

[94] è silogismo che la m’ha conchiusa
acutamente sì, che ‘nverso d’ella
ogne dimostrazion mi pare ottusa.’

[97] Io udi’ poi: ‘L’antica e la novella
proposizion che così ti conchiude,
perchè l’hai tu per divina favella?’

[100] E io: ‘La prova che ‘l ver mi dischiude,
son l’opere seguite, a che natura
non scalda ferro mai nè batte incude.’

[103] Risposto fummi: ‘Dì, chi t’assicura
che quell’ opere fosser? Quel medesimo
che vuol provarsi, non altri, il ti giura.’

[106] ‘Se ’l mondo si rivolse al cristianesimo’,
diss’ io, ‘sanza miracoli, quest’ uno
è tal, che li altri non sono il centesimo:

[109] chè tu intrasti povero e digiuno
in campo, a seminar la buona pianta
che fu già vite e ora è fatta prune’

[112] Finito questo, l’alta corte santa
risonò per le spere un ‘Dio laudamo’
ne la melode che là sù si canta.

[115] E quel baron che sì di ramo in ramo,
essaminando, già tratto m’avea,
che a l’ultime fronde appressavamo,

[118] ricominciò: ‘La Grazia, che donnea
con la tua mente, la bocca t’aperse
infino a qui come aprir si dovea,

[121] sì ch’io approvo ciò che fuori emerse;
ma or convien esprimere quel che credi,
e onde a la credenza tua s’offerse.’

[124] ‘O santo padre, e spirito che vedi
cio che credesti sì, che tu vincesti
ver’ lo sepulcro più giovani piedi,’

[127] comincia’ io, ‘tu vuo’ ch’io manifesti
la forma qui del pronto creder mio,
e anche la cagion di lui chiedesti.

[130] E io rispondo: Io credo in uno Dio
solo ed eterno, che tutto ’l ciel move,
non moto, con amore e con disio;

[133] e a tal creder non ho io pur prove
fisice e metafisice, ma dalmi
anche la verità che quinci piove

[136] per Moisè, per profeti e per salmi,
per l’Evangelio e per voi che scriveste
poi che l’ardente Spirto vi fè almi;

[139] e credo in tre persone etterne, e queste
credo una essenza sì una e sì trina,
che sofferà congiunto “sono” ed “este”.

[142] De la profonda condizion divina

ch'io tocco mo, la mente mi sigilla
più volte l'evangelica dottrina.

[145] Quest' è 'l principio, quest' è la favilla
che si dilata in fiamma poi vivace,
e come Stella in cielo in me scintilla.'

[148] Come 'l signor ch'ascolta quel che i piace,
da indi abbraccia il servo, gratulando
per la novella, tosto ch'el si tace;

[151] così, benedicendomi cantando,
tre volte cinse me, sì com' io tacqui,
l'appostolico lume al cui comando

[154] io avea detto: sì nel dir li piacqui!

CANTO 24

[1] 'You chosen confrères of the Blessèd Lamb
who feeds you at his solemn feast so well
that you are full in all you wish and will,

[4] if this man here should taste, by grace of God,
the crumbs and morsels falling from your board
before his death prescribes for him due time,

[7] direct your mind to his unmeasured zeal.
Let dew refresh him for a while. You drink
that spring for ever where his thought derives.'

[10] Thus Beatrice. And those happy souls is
became like spheres revolving round fixed points,
flaming in spinning turns as comets do.

[13]*The well-tuned wheels of gold chronometers
will seem (to those who check) to whirl in gear,
the first cog steady and the last in flight.

[16] So, too, with all their measures swirling diff-
erently, they, dancing, let me estimate
the riches – slow or rapid – each possessed.

[19] Then, from the one I'd marked of dearer worth,
I saw a fire flare out with so much joy
that none now left behind it was so clear.

[22] Three times it circled Beatrice round,
the song it sang too deeply divinized
for my imagination to recount.

[25] And so my pen will leap, and I'll not write.
Such pictures as we form – and words, of course –
are far too garish for those subtle pleats.

[28] 'My holy sister. You have prayed for this
with such devotion and such ardent prayers
that you unloose me from that lovely sphere.'

[31] Then, when that blessèd fire had come to rest,
it breathed directly to my lady there
in words of fire, as I have spoken them.

[34] And she: 'Eternal light of that great man

to whom Our Lord bequeathed the keys (which He first bore below) of this high jubilation,

[37] try him, as you may please, on any point – weighty or light – in matters of that Faith by which you came to walk across the sea.

[40] Whether he loves, believes and has good hope, cannot be secret. For your eyes here turn where all things are depicted, clear to see.

[43] But since this realm has gained its citizens through one true faith, it's good that he should come and speak of that, to glorify its name.'

[46] Compare: at vivas students hold their fire until, to test and not conclude the proof, professors lay their questions out to them.

[49] So I, while she was speaking, armed myself with every argument, to be prepared for questions, and professions of my own.

[52] 'Tell me, good Christian (and make clear you *are*): what is this faith?' At which, towards the light from which he breathed these words, I raised my brow,

[55] then turned to Beatrice. Quick in glance, she urged me, from my deepest inward source, that I should pour these spreading waters out.

[58] 'Let grace, which grants that I confess my faith to you, the noblest of centurions, make,' I began, 'my thoughts be well expressed.'

[61] And next: 'As written by the truthful pen, Father, of your dear brother Paul, who set, with you, great Rome upon its rightful track:

[64] "Faith is substantial to the things we hope, the evidence of things we do not see."
And such, in essence, I believe it is.'

[67] And then I heard: 'You understand aright – so long as you can tell why he classed faith as "substance" first, and then as "evidence".'

[70] I followed on: 'All those deep mysteries which here so freely show themselves to me

are, to the eyes of those down there well hid,

[73] so what they are lies wholly in belief,
on which is posited the highest hope.

Faith, for that reason, falls in *substance* class.

[76] And we are bound to form, from that belief –
with nothing seen beyond – sound arguments.
It's therefore classed as *evidence* as well.'

[79] And now I heard: 'If everything down there,
wrung out of doctrine, were so understood,
there'd be no room for showy sophistries.'

[82] This breathed from that enkindled love. And then,
'In alloy,' he went on, 'and legal weight,
the coin you produce has passed assay.

[85] But tell me, have you got it in your purse?'
At which, 'I have!' I said. 'Yes! Round and bright.
Nothing in how it's minted p'rhapses me.'

[88] And then came flowing from that deepest light
which there shone out: 'That precious gem of joy
in which all other virtues find their ground –

[91] whence does that come to you?' And I: 'The rain
(so generous!) of the Holy Ghost that flows
between the leathered texts, both old and new,

[94] in logic is, I think, conclusively
so sharp a proof that, when compared with that,
all formal arguments appear obtuse.'

[97] I heard then: 'All these premises, both old
and new, that bring you to conclude this, *why*
are these, you think, the light of holy tongues?'

[100] And I: 'The proof, for me, that unlocks truth
is found in deeds that followed from that faith.
Nature can't heat or hammer steel like that.'

[103] 'But say,' came this riposte, 'who gave to you
assurance of these deeds? That very Book
asserted this which still, itself, needs proof.'

[106] 'Suppose the world had turned to Christian faith
without these miracles,' I said, 'then that
would be a hundred times the miracle.'

[109] For you were poor and needy in the field,
when you went out to sow this fertile crop.
Once there were vines where now are only thorns.'

[112] When this was done, the holy court on high
echoed through all the spheres its 'God be praised!'
sung to the melodies they sing up there.

[115] That lord who, in examining my work,
had drawn me out, then onward branch to branch
(so that we now drew near the last, fresh leaves)

[118] once more began: 'The play of grace that woos
your mind has opened up, till now, your lips
exactly as it's right to open them.

[121] So, what emerged I seal and certify.
But now you need to say what you believe,
and say what source first gave this faith to you.'

[124] -'Most Holy Father, Spirit who now sees
what once you so believed that you outdid
the younger feet that ran towards the grave'

[127] (thus I began) 'you'd have me now make plain
the formal essence of my ready faith,
seeking as well its rationale and cause.

[130] I answer: I believe in one true God,
sole and eternal who, Himself not moved,
moves all the spheres by love and with desire.

[133] For this belief I have – beside those proofs
that physics gives, and metaphysics, too –
the truth that comes to me, as rain from here,

[136] -through Moses, through the prophets and the psalms,
through Gospel writings and the words you wrote
when once the ardent Spirit raised you high.

[139] And I believe in three eternal persons,
believing these one substance, one and three,
to whom, grammatically, apply both "is" and "are".

[142] This deep condition of divinity,
which I here note, is many times impressed
by Gospel teachings on my intellect.

[145] This doctrine is the origin, the spark

that spreads to light the living flame,
which flashes out in me as stars in heaven.'

[148] Like some great man, who, pleased with what he hears,
rejoicing at his servant's news, will fling
his arms, as silence falls, around his neck,

[151] so, singing as its blessings fell on me,
three times – my words now mute – it circled me,
the light of that apostle at whose will

[154] I'd spoken thus, the speech had pleased it so.

Canto 25

[1] Se mai continga che 'l poema sacro
al quale ha posto mano e cielo e terra,
sì che m'ha fatto per molti anni macro,

[4] vinca la crudeltà che fuor mi serra
del bello ovile ov' io dormi' agnello,
nimico ai lupi che li danno guerra;

[7] con altra voce omai, con altro vello
ritornerò poeta, e in sul fonte
del mio battesimo prenderò 'l cappello;

[10] però che ne la fede, che fa conte
l'anime a Dio, quivi intra' io, e poi
Pietro per lei sì mi girò la fronte.

[13] Indi si mosse un lume verso noi
di quella spera ond' uscì la primizia
che lasciò Cristo d'i vicari suoi;

[16] e la mia donna, piena di letizia,
mi disse: 'Mira, mira: ecco il barone
per cui là giù si vicita Galizia.'

[19] Sì come quando il Colombo si pone
presso al compagno, l'uno a l'altro pande,
girando e mormorando, l'affezione;

[22] così vid' io l'un da l'altro grande
principe glorioso essere accolto,
laudando il cibo che là sù li prande.

[25] Ma poi che 'l gratular si fu assolto,
tacito *coram me* ciascun s'affisse,
ignito sì che vincea 'l mio volto.

[28] Ridendo allora Beatrice disse:
'Inclita vita per cui la larghezza
de la nostra basilica si scrisse,

[31] fa risonar la spene in questa altezza:

tu sai, che tante fiate la figuri,
quante Iesù ai tre fé più carezza.’

[34] ‘Leva la testa e fa che t’assicuri:
che ciò che vien qua sù del mortal mondo,
convien ch’ai nostri raggi si maturi’.

[37] Questo conforto del foco secondo
mi venne; ond’ io levai li occhi a’ monti
che li ’ncurvaron pria col troppo pondo.

[40] ‘Poi che per grazia vuol che tu t’affronti
lo nostro Imperadore, anzi la morte,
ne l’aula più secreta co’ suoi conti,

[43] sì che, veduto il ver di questa corte,
la spene, che là giù bene innamora,
in te e in altrui di ciò conforte,

[46] di’ quel ch’ell’ è, di’ come se ne ‘nfiora
la mente tua, e dì onde a te venne’.
Così seguì ’l secondo lume ancora.

[49] E quella pia che guidò le penne
de le mie ali a così alto volo,
a la risposta così mi prevenne:

[51] ‘La Chiesa militante alcun figliuolo
non ha con più speranza, com’ è scritto
nel Sol che raggia tutto nostro stuolo:

[55] però li è concesso che d’Egitto
vegna in Ierusalemme per vedere,
anzi che ’l militar li sia prescritto.

[58] Li altri due punti, che non per sapere
son dimandati, ma perch’ ei rapporti
quanto questa virtù t’è in piacere,

[61] a lui lasc’ io, ché non li saran forti
né di iattanza; ed elli a ciò risponda,
e la grazia di Dio ciò li comporti’.

[64] Come discente ch’a dottor seconda
pronto e libente in quel ch’elli è esperto,
erché la sua bontà si disasconda,

[67] ‘Spene’, diss’ io, ‘è uno attender certo
de la gloria futura, il qual produce

grazia divina e precedente merto.

[70] Da molte stelle mi vien questa luce;
ma quei la distillo nel mio cor pria
che fu sommo cantor del sommo duce.

[73] “Sperino in te”, ne la sua teodia
dice, “color che sanno il nome tuo”:
e chi nol sa, s’elli ha la fede mia?

[76] Tu mi stillasti, con lo stillar suo,
ne la pistola poi; sì ch’io son pieno,
e in altrui vostra pioggia repluo.’

[79] Mentr’ io diceva, dentro al vivo seno
di quello incendio tremolava un lampo
sùbito e spesso a guisa di baleno.

[82] Indi spirò: ‘L’amore ond’ io avvampo
ancor ver’ la virtù che mi seguette
infin la palma e a l’uscir del campo,

[85] vuol ch’io respiri a te che ti dilette
di lei; ed emmi a grato che tu diche
quello che la speranza ti ‘mpromette.’

[88] E io: ‘Le nove e le scritture antiche
pongon lo segno, ed esso lo mi addita,
de l’anime che Dio s’ha fatte amiche.

[91] Dice Isaia che ciascuna vestita
ne la sua terra fia di doppia vesta:
e la sua terra è questa dolce vita;

[94] e ’l tuo fratello assai vie più digesta,
là dove tratta de le bianche stole,
questa revelazion ci manifesta.’

[97] E prima, appresso al fin d’este parole,
‘*Sperent in te*’ di sopr’ a noi s’udì;
a che rispuoser tutte le carole.

[100] Poscia tra esse un lume si schiarì
sì che, se ’l Cancro avesse un tal cristallo,
l’inverno avrebbe un mese d’un sol dì.

[103] E come surge e va ed entra in ballo
vergine lieta, sol per fare onore
a la novizia, non per alcun fallo,

[106] così vid' io lo schiarato splendore
venire a' due che si volgieno a nota
qual conveniesi al loro ardente amore.

[109] Misesi lì nel canto e ne la rota;
e la mia donna in lor tenea l'aspetto,
pur come sposa tacita e immota.

[112] . 'Questi è colui che giacque sopra 'l petto
del nostro pellicano, e questi fue
di sù la croce al grande officio eletto.'

[115] La donna mia così; né però piùè
mosser la vista sua di stare attenta
poscia che prima le parole sue.

[118] Qual è colui ch'adocchia e s'argomenta
di vedere eclissar lo sole un poco,
che, per veder, non vedente diventa;

[121] tal mi fec' io a quell' ultimo foco
mentre che detto fu: 'Perche t'abbagli
per veder cosa che qui non ha loco?

[124] In terra è terra il mio corpo, e saragli
tanto con li altri, che 'l numero nostro
con l'eterno proposito s'agguagli.

[127] Con le due stole nel beato chiostro
son le due luci sole che saliro;
e questo apporterai nel mondo vostro.'

[130] A questa voce l'infiammato giro
si quietò con esso il dolce mischio
che si facea nel suon del trino spiro,

[133] sì come, per cessar fatica o rischio,
li remi, pria ne l'acqua ripercossi,
tutti si posano al sonar d'un fischio.

[136] Ahi quanto ne la mente mi commossi,
quando mi volsi per veder Beatrice,
per non poter veder, benché io fossi

[139] presso di lei, e nel mondo felice!

CANTO 25

[1] If ever it should happen that this sacred work,
to which both Earth and Heaven have set their hands,
(making me over many years grow gaunt)

[4] might overcome the cruelty that locks me out
from where I slept, a lamb in that fine fold,
the enemy of wolves that war on it,

[7] with altered fleece, with altered voice, I shall
return as poet, taking, at my fount
of baptism, the laurel for my crown.

[10] For I first entered there within the faith
that makes us known, in soul, to God, and then,
for that same faith, Saint Peter ringed my brow.

[13] Towards us now there moved a light
drawn from the sphere where that first fruit of all
the ministers of Christ had issued out.

[16] And, filled with happiness, my lady said:
‘Look there! The wonder of it! Look! The Lord
for whom the pilgrims travel to Galicia.’

[19] Compare: a dove will settle by its mate
and, each to each, both turning, murmuring,
make proclamation of the love they feel.

[22] So, too, I saw in glory each great prince
made welcome, each by each, in that high realm,
praising alike the feast at which they sat.

[25]*-But when their greetings reached their formal end,
they stood in silence firmly *coram me*,
their sudden fire defeating my turned eyes.

[28] And smiling, Beatrice now spoke out:
‘You living excellence! Your written scrolls
record the spacious giving of our hall.

[31] Make hope now echo in these generous heights.
You well know how. Whenever Jesus graced
his favoured three, you figured hope from that.’

[34] ‘Raise your head high and gather confidence.

For all that rises from your mortal world
will grow to ripeness in these rays of ours.'

[37] Such comfort reached me from the second fire.
I therefore raised my eyes towards the hills,
which first had bowed them down too heavily.

[40] 'Because our Emperor in grace desires
that you, before your death, should come to greet
his nobles in these secret audience rooms –

[43] so that, once truth is seen in this high court,
the hope that stirs you in good love down there
may gather strength in you and others, too –

[46] say what hope is, and how, within your mind,
it comes to flower, and how it came to you.'
The second light, in this way, followed on.

[49] And she who guided, in all holiness,
the pinions of my wings to fly so high
answered, before I could myself, with this:

[52] 'The Church, at war on earth, has not a child –
and this is written in that Sun whose rays
here shine upon our ranks – more full of hope.

[55]*It has, therefore, been granted him to come,
before his term of soldiership is through,
from Egypt to behold Jerusalem.

[58] The next two points at which your questions strike –
seeking not knowledge but that he report
how greatly hope, as virtue, pleases you –

[61] I leave to him. These won't prove difficult,
and yet won't tempt him into mere display.
Let him reply. May God's grace bear him on.'

[64] A bright, keen student who has done his work
is quick to answer to his lecturer's hint,
and thus disclose to her how good he is.

[67] 'Hope is that sure expectation,' I declared,
'of glory that will come. The grace of God
and precedent good works produce this power.

[70] From many stars its light comes down to me.
But David first instilled it in my heart,

that highest singer of the highest Lord.

[73]*“Let those have hope in you who know His name.”
So David, in his psalmody, sings out.

And who cannot know that who shares my faith?

[76] Then you in your epistle – as with drops
of dew – distilled my hopes. So I am full,
and rain your cooling shower on other lives.’

[79]*While I spoke on, within the living breast
of that fierce blaze, repeated tremors flashed,
as rapid as in any lightning storm.

[82] ‘The love by which,’ it breathed, ‘I still am fired
towards that virtue which came with me till
I won the martyr’s palm and left the field,

[85] wills that, to you who take the same delight,
I breathe once more. My pleasure is: you say
what promises your hope has made to you.’

[88] And I: ‘The Scriptures, both the old and new,
define and indicate that goal for me:
the friendship God concludes with certain souls.

[91] Isaiah says that each, in his own land,
will be arrayed in two-fold vestiture.
And “his own land” is here, this sweetest life.

[94]*And yet more fully your own brother makes
this revelation clear to us. He speaks
(in the Apocalypse) of pure white dress.’

[97] Then, first, when once these words had reached their end,
‘*Sperent in te*’ above us could be heard,
and all the circling choirs replied to that.

[100]*And then, amid them all, one light shone clear.
(Were such a crystal held in star sign Crab,
inter would have a month of sunlit day.)

[103] Young girls will rise light-heartedly and go
to join in dancing and (so far from shame)
intend an honour to the newly-wed.

[106] So I saw now that ever-clearer gleam
approach the two who spun to their own notes
in keeping with the ardour of their love.

[109] This set itself within the wheeling song.
My lady kept her eyes fixed firm on these,
as silent as a bride, as motionless.

[112]*‘He is the one who lay upon the breast
of Christ, our Pelican. And he it was
elected, at the Cross, for one great task.’

[115] My lady spoke, and yet she did not cease,
before or after, to maintain her gaze
here first it was, attentively, so fixed.

[118] Like someone peering, doing all he can,
to see some moment of the sun’s eclipse,
who, seeing, grows unseeing all the more,

[121]*so I became, as this last fire appeared,
while words were said: ‘Why dazzle your strained eyes
to see things in this place that cannot be?’

[124] My body lies as earth in earth, and shall
(as others shall) until our numbers mount
to equal what’s eternally decreed.

[127]*Two lights alone have risen in both robes –
in soul and body – to this cloistered joy.
You’ll carry word of this to your own tribe.’

[130] As this was said, the flaming wheel grew still,
as did the lovely mingling of those sounds
that formed within that breathing three-in-one.

[133] (Compare: to put an end to strain or risk,
oars that repeatedly had struck the waves
all stop the moment that the whistle sounds.)

[136] Ah! What great turmoil in my mind to turn,
thinking to see where Beatrice was,
and yet not see – although so near to her,

[139] despite my being in that happy sphere.

Canto 26

[1] Mentr' io dubbiava per lo viso spento,
de la fulgida fiamma che lo spense
uscì un spiro che mi fece attento,

[4] dicendo: 'Intanto che tu ti risense
de la vista che hai in me consunta,
ben è che ragionando la compense.

[7] Comincia dunque; e dì ove s'appunta
l'anima tua, e fa ragion che sia
la vista in te smarrita e non defunta:

[10] perché la donna che per questa dia
region ti conduce, ha ne lo sguardo
la virtù ch'ebbe la man d'Anania.'

[13] Io dissi: 'Al suo piacere e tosto e tardo
vegna remedio a li occhi, che fuor porte
quand' ella entrò col foco ond' io sempr' ardo.

[16] Lo ben che fa contenta questa corte,
Alfa e O è di quanta scrittura
mi legge Amore o lievemente o forte.'

[19] Quella medesima voce che paura
tolta m'avea del sùbito abbarbaglio,
di ragionare ancor mi mise in cura;

[22] e disse: 'Certo a pù angusto vaglio
ti conviene schiarar: dicer convienti
chi drizzò l'arco tuo a tal berzaglio.'

[25] E io: 'Per filosofici argomenti
e per autorità che quinci scende
cotale amor convien che in me si 'mprenti:

[28] ché 'l bene, in quanto ben, come s'intende,
così accende amore, e tanto maggio
quanto più di bontate in sé comprende.

[31] Dunque a l'essenza ov' è tanto awantaggio,

che ciascun ben che fuor di lei si trova
altro non è ch'un lume di suo raggio,

[34] . più che in altra convien che si mova
la mente, amando, di ciascun che cerne
il vero in che si fonda questa prova.

[37] Tal vero a l'intelletto mio sterne
colui che mi dimostra il primo amore
di tutte le sustanze sempiterne.

[40] Sternel la voce del verace autore,
che dice a Mois è, di sé parlando:
“Io ti farò vedere ogne valore.”

[43] Sternilmi tu ancora, incominciando
l'alto preconio che grida l'arcano
di qui là giù sovra ogne altro bando.'

[46] E io udi': 'Per intelletto umano
e per autoritadi a lui concorde
d'i tuoi amori a Dio guarda il sovrano.

[49] Ma dì ancor se tu senti altre corde
tirarti verso lui, sì che tu suone
con quanti denti questo amor ti morde.'

[52] Non fu latente la santa intenzione
de l'aguglia di Cristo, anzi m'accorsi
dove volea menar mia professione.

[55] Però ricominciai: 'Tutti quei morsi
che posson far lo cor volgere a Dio,
a la mia caritate son concorsi:

[58] ché l'essere del mondo e l'esser mio,
la morte ch'el sostenne perch' io viva,
e quel che spera ogne fedel com' io,

[61] con la predetta conoscenza viva,
tratto m'hanno del mar de l'amor torto,
e del diritto m'han posto a la riva.

[64] Le fronde onde s'infronda tutto l'orto
de l'ortolano eterno, am' io cotanto
quanto da lui a lor di bene è porto.'

[67] Si com' io tacqui, un dolcissimo canto
risonò per lo cielo, e la mia donna

dicea con li altri: ‘Santo, santo, santo!’

[70] E come a lume acuto si disonna
per lo spirto visivo che ricorre

a lo splendor che va di gonna in gonna,

[73] e lo svegliato ciò che vede aborre,
sì nescia è la sòbita vigilia

fin che la stimativa non soccorre;

[76] così de li occhi miei ogne quisquilia
fugò Beatrice col raggio d’i suoi,

che rifulgea da più di mille milia:

[79] onde mei che dinanzi vidi poi;
e quasi stupefatto domandai
d’un quarto lume ch’io vidi tra noi.

[82] E la mia donna: ‘Dentro da quei rai
vagheggia il suo fattor l’anima prima
che la prima virtù creasse mai.’

[85] Come la fronda che flette la cima
nel transito del vento, e poi si leva
per la propria virtù che la soblima,

[88] fec’ io in tanto in quant’ ella diceva,
stupendo, e poi mi rifece sicuro
un disio di parlare ond’ io ardeva.

[91] E cominciai: ‘O pomo che maturo
solo prodotto fosti, o padre antico
a cui ciascuna sposa è figlia e nuro,

[94] divoto quanto posso a te supplico
perché mi parli: tu vedi mia voglia,
e per udirti tosto non la dico.’

[97] Talvolta un animal coverto broglia,
sì che Paffetto convien che si paia
per lo seguir che face a lui la ‘nvoglia;

[100] e similmente l’anima primaia
mi facea trasparer per la coverta
quant’ ella a compiacermi venìa gaia.

[103] Indi spirò: ‘Sanz’ essermi proferta
da te, la voglia tua discerno meglio
che tu qualunque cosa t’è più certa;

[106] perch' io la veggio nel verace specchio
che fa di sé pareggio a l'altre cose,
e nulla face lui di se pareggio.

[109] Tu vuogli undir quant' è che Dio mi puose
ne l'eccelso giardino, ove costei
a così lunga scala ti dispuose,

[112] e quanto fu diletto a li occhi miei,
e la propria cagion del gran disdegno,
e l'idioma ch'usai e che fei.

[115] Or, figliuol mio, non il gustar del legno
fu per sé la cagion di tanto essilio,
ma solamente il trapassar del segno.

[118] Quindi onde mosse tua donna Virgilio,
quattromilia trecento e due volumi
di sol desiderai questo concilio;

[121] e vidi lui tornare a tutt' i lumi
de la sua strada novecento trenta
fiate, mentre ch'io in terra fu'mi.

[124] La lingua ch'io parlai fu tutta spenta
innanzi che a l'ovra inconsummabile
fosse la gente di Nembròt attenta:

[127] ché nullo effetto mai razionabile,
per lo piacere uman che rinovella
seguendo il cielo, sempre fu durabile.

[130] Opera naturale e ch'uom favella;
ma così o così, natura lascia
poi fare a voi secondo che v'abbella.

[133] Pria ch'i' scendessi a l'infernale ambascia,
I s'appellava in terra il sommo bene
onde vien la letizia che mi fascia;

[136] e *El* si chiamò poi: e ciò convene,
ché l'uso d'i mortali è come fronda
in ramo, che sen va e altra vene.

[139] Nel monte che si leva più da l'onda,
fu' io, con vita pura e disonesta,
a la prim' ora a quella che seconda,

[142] come 'l sol muta quadra, l'ora sesta.'

CANTO 26

[1] As I stood wavering, all seeing gone,
out of the flashing flame that quenched my sight
a breathing stirred that won my whole attention,

[4] saying: 'While you have yet to re-awaken
the sense of sight that spent itself in me,
it's good that you, with words, should compensate.

[7] Begin, then. Say what point the soul of you
is aiming at, and know, with reason, that your powers
of sight, blurred and confused, are not extinct.

[10]*The lady who now leads you through this god '
like realm has, in the glance she gives to you,
the power that lay in Ananias' hand.'

[13] 'As now or later pleases her,' I said,
'may healing fall upon these eyes – the gates
through which she came with fires I burn from still.

[16] In every text that Love reads out to me –
voiced low or strong – the Alpha and Omega is
the Good that brings content to all this court.'

[19] The voice that first had freed me from my fear
when that bedazzlement had struck my eyes
now sharpened my concern to speak once more.

[22] It said to me: 'You must, for certain, clear
in thought a stricter path. You need to tell
who is it aims your bow towards its mark.'

[25] And I: 'By reasons in philosophy,
as by those Scriptures that descend from here,
Love, of necessity, is stamped in me.

[28] For good *per se*, once recognized as good,
sets love on fire – the fiercer still as love
holds more of good within its proper self.

[31] Towards that essence, then (which holds such sway
that any good that's found beyond its reach
is nothing save a beam of that one ray),

[34] the mind, in loving, will more rightly move

than elsewhere – or those minds, at least, that see the truth on which this demonstration stands.

[37]*To my own mind that truth is first proclaimed by one who demonstrates the primal love of all the sempiternal forms of life.

[40] Proclaimed as well by our true Font and Rule, Who, speaking of Himself, to Moses said:
“I shall indeed ensure you see all good.”

[43] Proclaimed, no less, by you in your first lines – that trumpet call that shouted the arcane clearer than any fanfare down from here.’

[46] And then I heard: ‘Through human intellect, and through authorities well-tuned to thought, the highest of your loves looks up to God.

[49] But say, as well, what other ropes you feel that draw you to Him and so, too, sound forth how many teeth love’s cog wheel bites you with.’

[52] Nothing lay hidden in the holy mind of Christ’s great Eagle. And I saw at once where he meant my avowals to advance.

[55] So I began: ‘As many ratchet-teeth as ever turn the human heart to God, all run as one with my own charity.

[58] My being, and the being of the world, the death that He sustained so I might live, the hope that all, with me, confess in faith,

[61] the living knowledge I have spoken of – all drew me from the waves of wrongful love and set me on the shores of righteousness.

[64]*And every leaf, en-leafing all the grove of our eternal orchardist, I love as far as love is borne to them from Him.’

[67]*As I fell silent, through the sky there rang the sweetest song – my lady and these souls all saying now the ‘Holy, Holy, Holy’.

[70]*A piercing light will startle us from sleep – eye-pulses racing as they meet the glare

hat passes through the lens from skirt to skirt –

[73] and, shocked awake, we muddle what we see,
a blank, mere nescience, at this alert,
until our faculties restore their aid.

[76] So, too, the eyes of Beatrice shone –
their ray would reach a thousand miles or more –
routing the maculae that tainted mine.

[79] I saw now better than I had before.
And, all but stunned, I asked who that light was,
appearing as the fourth amongst us there.

[82] My *donna* answered me: ‘Within those rays,
the Maker looks with love upon the first
of souls that primal power had ever formed.’

[85] As fresh-leaved branches, when a breeze goes by,
bend at their tip, and then – through inner strength
which points them high – will straighten once again,

[88] So I did, swaying, wavering at her words,
to be re-made, complete in confidence
that flowed from my own burning urge to speak.

[91] ‘You are the single apple,’ I began,
‘produced as full and ripe. In kin and law,
to you all brides are daughters, first of men.

[94] I beg, with all the reverence I can bring,
that you should speak to me. You know my will.
And so – to hear you sooner – I’ll not say.’

[97] A beast will sometimes wriggle in a sack,
and so display the feelings that it has
from how the wrapping follows what it does.

[100] In that same way, the first of human souls
made me see clearly, through his covering,
how light of heart he was to meet my will.

[103] And then he breathed: ‘Without your offering,
I understand what you desire to know
better than you know all you hold most sure.

[106] I see this shining truly in the glass
that holds the pure pareil of other things,
and yet in nothing finds its parallel.

[109] You wish to hear how long God had me stay
within that garden rising to the heights
where she, your *donna*, set you on this stair;

[112] how long that garden gave my eye delight, m
and what the reason was for God's fierce scorn,
and what the language was I formed and used.

[115] My dearest son, the tasting of the tree
was not itself the cause of banishment,
but rather our transgression of the mark.

[118]*From where your *donna* once sent Virgil out,
four thousand revolutions of the sun,
two hundred more than two, I craved this court.

[121] I'd seen the sun, with all its lights, return
along the starry road, nine hundred times
then thirty, in the years I passed on earth.

[124] The language that I spoke was wholly spent
before the tribe of Nimrod set their minds
on work that could not, ever, reach fulfilment.

[127] For nothing that our natural powers effect
(since human pleasures, as the years pass by,
are always new) was ever durable.

[130] It's Nature's work that human beings speak.
But whether thus or thus, man's nature leaves
to you to fashion as you may best please.

[133]*Before I sank to Hell's deep agonies,
the Highest Good – from which derives the joy
I'm swathed in here – was known on earth as 'I'.

[136] Then afterwards we called it *El*. Needs must.
With mortal usages, like leaves along
branch, one goes and then another comes.

[139]*On that mount rising highest from the sea
I was – in pure, and then dishonoured, life –
from when the first hour dawns until the hour

[142] that follows, as the sun moves zone, the sixth.'

Canto 27

[1] ‘Al Padre, al Figlio, a lo Spirito Santo,’
cominciò, ‘gloria!’, tutto ’l paradiso,
sì che m’inebriava il dolce canto.

[4] Ciò ch’io vedeva mi sembiava un riso
de l’universo; per che mia ebbrezza
intrava per l’udire e per lo viso.

[7] Oh gioia! oh ineffabile allegrezza!
oh vita intègra d’amore e di pace!
oh senza brama sicura ricchezza!

[10] Dinanzi a li occhi miei le quattro face
stavano accese, e quella che pria venne
incomincio a farsi più vivace,

[13] e tal ne la sembianza sua divenne,
qual diverrebbe love, s’elli e Marte
fossero augelli e cambiassersi penne.

[16] La provedenza, che quivi comparte
vice e officio, nel beato coro
silenzio posto avea da ogne parte,

[19] quand’ io udi’: ‘Se io mi trascoloro,
non ti maravigliar, ché, dicend’ io,
vedrai trascolorar tutti costoro.

[22] Quelli ch’usurpa in terra il luogo mio,
il luogo mio, il luogo mio, che vaca
ne la presenza del Figliuol di Dio,

[25] fatt’ ha del cimitero mio cloaca
del sangue e de la puzza; onde ‘l perverso
che cadde di qua su, la giu si placa.’

[28] Di quel color che per lo sole avverso
nube dipigne da sera e da mane,
vid’ io allora tutto ‘l ciel cosperso.

[31] E come donna onesta che permane

di sé sicura, e per l'altrui fallanza,
pur ascoltando, timida si fane,

[34] così Beatrice trasmutò sembianza;
e tale eclissi credo che 'n ciel fue
quando patì la suprema possanza.

[37] Poi procedetter le parole sue
con voce tanto da sé trasmutata,
che la sembianza non si muto piue:

[40] 'Non fu la sposa di Cristo allevata
del sangue mio, di Lin, di quel di Cleto,
per essere ad acquisto d'oro usata;

[43] ma per acquisto d'esto viver lieto
e Sisto e Pio e Calisto e Urbano
sparser lo sangue dopo molto fleto.

[46] Non fu nostra intenzion ch'a destra mano
d'i nostri successor parte sedesse,
parte da l'altra del popol cristiano;

[49] né che le chiavi che mi fuor concesse,
divenisser signaculo in vessillo
che contra battezzati combattesse;

[52] né ch'io fossi figura di sigillo
a privilegi venduti e mendaci,
ond' io sovente arrosso e disfavillo.

[55] In vesta di pastor lupi rapaci
si veggion di qua sù per tutti i paschi:
o difesa di Dio, perché pur giaci?

[58] Del sangue nostro Caorsini e Guaschi
s'apparecchian di bere: o buon principio,
a che vil fine convien che tu caschi!

[61] Ma l'alta provedenza, che con Scipio
difese a Roma la gloria del mondo,
soccorrà tosto, sì com' io concipio;

[64] e tu, figliuol, che per lo mortal pondo
ancor giii tornerai, apri la bocca,
e non asconder quel ch'io non ascondo.'

[67] Si come di vapor gelati fiocca
in giuso l'aere nostro, quando 'l corno

de la capra del ciel col sol si tocca,

[70] in sù vid' io così l'etera addorno
farsi e fioccar di vapor triunfanti
che fatto avien con noi quivi soggiorno.

[73] Lo viso mio seguiva i suoi sembianti,
e seguì fin che 'l mezzo, per lo molto,
li tolse il trapassar del più avanti.

[76] Onde la donna, che mi vide assolto
de l'attendere in sù, mi disse: 'Adima
il viso e guarda come tu se' vòlto.'

[79] Da l'ora ch'io avea guardato prima
i' vidi mosso me per tutto l'arco
che fa dal mezzo al fine il primo clima;

[82] sì ch'io vedea di là da Gade il varco
folle d'Ulisse, e di qua presso il lito
nel qual si fece Europa dolce carico.

[85] E più mi fora scoperto il sito
di questa aiuola; ma 'l sol procedea
sotto i mie' piedi un segno e più partito.

[88] La mente innamorata, che donnea
con la mia donna sempre, di ridure
ad essa li occhi più che mai ardea;

[91] e se natura o arte fé pasture
da pigliare occhi, per aver la mente,
in carne umana o ne le sue pitture,

[94] tutte adunate, parrebber niente
ver' lo piacer divin che mi refulse,
quando mi volsi al suo viso ridente.

[97] E la virtù che lo sguardo m'indulse,
del bel nido di Leda mi divelse,
e nel ciel velocissimo m'impulse.

[100] Le parti sue vivissime ed eccelse
sì uniforme son, ch'i' non so dire
qual Beatrice per loco mi scelse.

[103] Ma ella, che vedea 'l mio disire,
incominciò, ridendo tanto lieta,
che Dio pareva nel suo volto gioire:

[106] 'La natura del mondo, che quieta
il mezzo e tutto l'altro intorno move,
quinci comincia come da sua meta;

[109] e questo cielo non ha altro dove
che la mente divina, in che s'accende
l'amor che 'l volge e la virtù ch'ei piove.

[112] Luce e amor d'un cerchio lui comprende,
sì come questo li altri; e quel precinto
colui che 'l cinge solamente intende.

[115] Non è suo moto per altro distinto,
ma li altri son mensurati da questo,
sì come diece da mezzo e da quinto;

[118] e come il tempo tegna in cotal testo
le sue radici e ne li altri le fronde,
omai a te può esser manifesto.

[121] Oh cupidigia che i mortali affonde
sì sotto te, che nessuno ha podere
di trarre li occhi fuor de le tue onde!

[124] Ben fiorisce ne li uomini il volere;
ma la pioggia continua converte
in bozzacchioni le sosine vere.

[127] Fede e innocenza son reperte
solo ne' parvoletti; poi ciascuna
pria fugge che le guance sian coperte.

[130] Tale, balbuziando ancor, digiuna,
che poi divora, con la lingua sciolta,
qualunque cibo per qualunque luna;

[133] e tal, balbuziando, ama e ascolta
la madre sua, che, con loquela intera,
disia poi di vederla sepolta.

[136] Così si fa la pelle bianca nera
nel primo aspetto de la bella figlia
di quel ch'apporta mane e lascia sera.

[139] Tu, perché non ti facci maraviglia,
pensa che 'n terra non e chi governi;
onde sì svia l'umana famiglia.

[142] Ma prima che gennaio tutto si sverni

per la centesma ch'è là giù negletta,
raggeran sì questi cerchi superni,
[145] che la fortuna che tanto s'aspetta,
le poppe volgerà u' son le prore,
sì che la classe correrà diretta;
[148] e vero frutto verrà dopo 'l fiore.'

CANTO 27

[1] 'To Father and Son and the Holy Ghost,
glory on high!' all Heaven here began,
till I, at that sweet song, reeled drunkenly.

[4] And what I saw, it seemed, was now the laughter
of the universe. So drunkenness, for me,
came in through hearing and, no less, through sight.

[7] The joy of that! The happiness beyond all words!
A life of peace and love, entire and whole!
Riches all free of craving, troubleless!

[10] The faces of the four before my eyes
were bright with fire. That soul (the first who came)
began to grow more brilliant still at this.

[13] And now, in how it looked, this face became
what Jove would be if he and Mars were birds,
and both exchanged their plumage, white for red.

[16] The providence that makes division here
of duties, tasks and offices imposed
perfect silence on the holy choir.

[19] And then I heard: 'If I change colour now,
don't be amazed at that. For all of these,
as I go on, you'll see change colour, too.

[22]*He who on earth has robbed me of my place,
my place, my place – which therefore, in the sight
of God's dear Son, stands vacant now – has made

[25] of my own burial ground a shit hole
reeking of blood and pus. In this the sod
who fell from here down there takes sheer delight.'

[28] With that same colour that a cloud takes on,
morning or evening, when it meets the sun,
I saw, in every part, the heavens flush.

[31] And as some innocent – herself quite clean
in conscience – when she notes another's fault
may still, on hearing this, grow chaste and shy,

[34] so Beatrice changed in countenance.

So, too, I think the heavens were once eclipsed
when Utmost Power submitted to the Cross.

[37] And then Saint Peter's words went on, his voice
transformed so utterly from what it was
that he, in look, could not have been more changed.

[40]*'The Bride of Christ was not brought forth and raised
on blood of mine – of Linus, too, and Cletus –
to be made use of in pursuit of gold,

[43] but rather, to pursue here living joy,
Sixtus and Pius, Urban, Calixtus,
after harsh tears all shed their blood for this.

[46]*We did not mean that some of Christ's own race
should sit in favour on our heirs' right hand,
and others, to the left, incur disgrace;

[49] nor that the keys entrusted to my hands
should serve as battle emblem on the flag
that fought against those marked by baptism;

[52] nor that, myself, I should become the stamp
that seals the sale of untrue privilege.
I flare and redden often at this thought.

[55] Down there, in every pasture, ravening wolves
are seen dressed up as shepherds and as priests.
God our defence, why are you still unmoved?

[58]*Gascons along with bankers from Cahors
prepare themselves to drink our martyr blood.
To what corrupted ends good starts may sink!

[61]*But Providence on high that made defence
through Scipio at Rome of this world's fame
will soon, as I conceive it, offer aid.

[64] And you, my son, whose body weighs you down
so you'll return below, speak openly
and do not hide what I don't hide from you.'

[67]*When Sun and Goat Horn touch as winter signs,
the air in our terrestrial atmosphere
loats down in falls of frozen vapour flakes.

[70] So now I saw, with *upward* sweeping flakes,
the aether decked in those triumphant airs

hat first had passed their time with us below.

[73] My eyes, in following these semblances,
followed until the space between became
so great it took away sight's power to pass.

[76] At which my lady, seeing me absolved
from all attention to the heights, now said:
'Now sink your gaze, and see how far you've turned.'

[79]*I saw that since the time I'd first looked down
I'd moved in those six hours through all the arc,
mid-point to end, the first zone makes on earth,

[82] so that I saw, beyond Cadiz, the mad
sea-jaunt of Ulysses and, east, the shore
where soft Europa once was borne away.

[85] And more still of that eastward threshing floor
would have been shown me but, beneath my feet,
the sun, processing, reached a farther sign.

[88] My mind, so deep in love that always woos,
as *donna*, my *donna*, burned more fiercely still
to turn its eyes once more to where she was.

[91] Though art or nature, to possess our minds,
may, in its paintings or in flesh itself,
produce beguiling pastures for our eyes,

[94] these all would seem as nothing when compared
with that divine delight which shone on me
when I turned round to see her smiling look.

[97] The inward powers her glance bestowed on me,
uprooting me from Leda's lovely nest,
impelled me to the swiftest of the skies.

[100] Its regions so exalted, living bright,
are all so uniform I cannot say
which Beatrice chose to be my place.

[103] But she, who saw the strength of my desire,
laughing with such great happiness
that God appeared rejoicing in her face:

[106] 'The order in the natural spheres that stills
the central point and moves, round that, all else,
here sets its confine and begins its rule.'

[109] This primal sphere has no “where” other than
the mind of God. The love that makes it turn
is kindled there, so, too, the powers it rains.

[112] Brightness and love contain it in one ring,
as this, in turn, contains the spheres below.
And only He who binds it knows the bond.

[115] Its motion is not gauged by other marks.
All other marks are measured out from this –
as ten is factored by its half and fifth.

[118] So now it will be clear to you how Time
takes root within the humus of this bowl,
and shows its fronds in every other part.

[121] Crass, itching greed! You plunge our mortal sense
so far within your depth that none can drag
their eyes above the mounting turbulence!

[124] Intention blossoms well in human hearts.
But rain, unending rain, will render down
he true, ripe plum to shrivelled pods of blight.

[127] Good faith and innocence are only found
in infant schools. And both will long have fled
before the cheek is covered with a beard.

[130] There’s one kid, burbling still, awaiting food,
who when he’s fluent in his speech will gorge
on every dish, beneath whatever moon.

[133] There’s one there (burbling, too) who loves his mum
and heeds her words, who, when his tongue grows whole,
will long to see her buried in her grave.

[136]*-And so the whitest skin is scorched pitch black
merely to glimpse the lovely child of him
who brings the dawn and leaves behind the dark.

[139] And you – so you should not suppose this strange –
think that on earth there’s no one who will rule,
and so the human family goes astray.

[142]*-But those neglected hundredths in our dates
will make of January a spring-song month
before these circling heights send down such rays

[145] that storms of fortune, so long waited for,

will spin the stern to where the prow is now,
so all the fleet will run a proper course,
[148] and fruit will follow truly from the flower.'

Canto 28

[1] Poscia che 'ncontro a la vita presente
d'i miseri mortali aperse 'l vero
quella che 'mparadisa la mia mente,

[4] come in lo specchio fiamma di doppiero
vede colui che se n'alluma retro,
prima che l'abbia in vista o in pensiero,

[7] e sé rivolge per veder se 'l vetro
li dice il vero, e vede ch'el s'accorda
con esso come nota con suo metro;

[10] così la mia memoria si ricorda
ch'io feci riguardando ne' belli occhi
onde a pigliarmi fece Amor la corda.

[13] E com' io mi rivolsi e furon tocchi
li miei da ciò che pare in quel volume,
quandunque nel suo giro ben s'adocchi,

[16] un punto vidi che raggiava lume
acuto sì, che 'l viso ch'elli affoca
chiuder conviensi per lo forte acume;

[19] e quale Stella par quinci più poca,
parrebbe luna, locata con esso
come stella con Stella si collòca.

[22] Forse cotanto quanto pare appresso
alo cigner la luce che 'l dipigne
uando 'l vapor che 'l porta più è spesso,

[25] distante intorno al punto un cerchio d'igne
si girava sì ratio, ch'avria vinto
quel moto che più tosto il mondo cigne;

[28] e questo era d'un altro circumcinto,
e quel dal terzo, e 'l terzo poi dal quarto,
dal quinto il quarto, e poi dal sesto il quinto.

[31] Sopra seguiva il settimo sì sparto

già di larghezza, che 'l messo di Iuno
intero a contenerlo sarebbe arto.

[34] Così l'ottavo e 'l nono; e chiascheduno
più tardo si movea, secondo ch'era
in numero distante più da l'uno;

[37] e quello avea la fiamma più sincera
cui men distava la favilla pura,
credo, però che più di lei s'invera.

[40] La donna mia, che mi vedea in cura
forte sospeso, disse: 'Da quel punto
depende il cielo e tutta la natura.

[43] Mira quel cerchio che più li è congiunto;
e sappi che 'l suo muovere è sì tosto
per l'affocato amore ond' elli è punto.'

[46] E io a lei: 'Se 'l mondo fosse posto
con l'ordine ch'io veggio in quelle rote,
sazio m'avrebbe ciò che m'è proposto;

[49] ma nel mondo sensibile si puote
veder le volte tanto più divine,
quant' elle son dal centro più remote.

[52] Onde, se 'l mio disir dee aver fine
in questo miro e angelico templo
che solo amore e luce ha per confine,

[55] udir convienmi ancor come l'esempio
e l'esemplare non vanno d'un modo,
chè io per me indarno a ciò contemplo.'

[58] 'Se li tuoi did non sono a tal nodo
sufficienti, non è maraviglia:
tanto, per non tentare, è fatto sodo!'

[61] Così la donna mia; poi disse: 'Piglia
quel ch'io ti dicerò, se vuo' saziarti;
e intorno da esso t'assottiglia.

[64] Li cerchi corporai sono ampi e arti
secondo il più e 'l men de la virtute
che si distende per tutte lor parti.

[67] Maggior bontà vuol far maggior salute;
maggior salute maggior corpo cape,

s'elli ha le parti igualmente compiute.

[70] Dunque costui che tutto quanto rape
l'altro universo seco, corrisponde
al cerchio che più ama e che più sape:

[73] per che, se tu a la virtù circonde
la tua misura, non a la parvenza
de le sustanze che t'appaion tonde,

[76] tu vederai mirabil conseguenza
di maggio a più e di minore a meno,
in ciascun cielo, a sua intelligenza.'

[79] Come rimane splendido e sereno
l'emisperio de l'aere, quando soffia
Borea da quella guancia ond' è più leno,

[82] per che si purga e risolve la roffia
che pria turbava, sì che 'l ciel ne ride
con le bellezze d'ogne sua paroffia;

[85] così fec'io, poi che mi provide
la donna mia del suo risponder chiaro,
e come stella in cielo il ver si vide.

[88] E poi che le parole sue restaro,
non altrimenti ferro disfavilla
che bolle, come i cerchi sfavillaro.

[91] L'incendio suo seguiva ognè scintilla;
ed eran tante, che 'l numero loro
più che 'l doppiar de li scacchi s'inmilla.

[94] Io sentiva osannar di coro in coro
al punto fisso che li tiene a li *ubi*,
e terrà sempre, ne' quai sempre fuoro.

[97] E quella che vedea i pensier dubi
ne la mia mente, disse: 'I cerchi primi
t'hanno mostrato Serafi e Cherubi.

[100] Così veloci seguono i suoi vimi,
per somigliarsi al punto quanto ponno;
e posson quanto a veder son sublimi.

[103] Quelli altri amori che 'ntorno li vonno,
si chiaman Troni del divino aspetto,
per che 'l primo ternaro terminonno;

[106] e dei saper che tutti hanno diletto
quanto la sua veduta si profonda
nel vero in che si queta ogni intelletto.

[109] Quinci si può veder come si fonda
l'esser beato ne l'atto che vede,
non in quel ch'ama, che poscia seconda;

[112] e del vedere è misura mercede,
che grazia partorisce e buona voglia:
così di grado in grado si procede.

[115] L'altro ternaro, che così germoglia
in questa primavera sempiterna
che notturno Ariete non dispoglia,

[118] perpetualmente "*Osanna*" sberna
con tre melode, che suonano in tree
ordini di letizia onde s'interna.

[121] In essa gerarcia son l'altre dee:
prima Dominazioni, e poi Virtudi;
l'ordine terzo di Podestadi è.

[124] Poscia ne' due penultimi tripudi
Principati e Arcangeli si girano;
l'ultimo è tutto d'Angelici ludi.

[127] Questi ordini di sù tutti s'ammirano,
e di giù vincon sì, che verso Dio
tutti tirati sono e tutti tirano.

[130] E Dionisio con tanto disio
a contemplar questi ordini si mise,
che li nomò e distinse com' io.

[133] Ma Gregorio da lui poi si divise;
onde, sì tosto come li occhi aperse
in questo ciel, di sé medesmo rise.

[136] E se tanto secreto ver proferse
mortale in terra, non voglio ch'ammiri:
ché chi 'l vide qua sù gliel discoperse

[139] con altro assai del ver di questi giri.'

CANTO 28

[1] In contradiction of the life now led
in mortal misery, she – the in-paradizer
of my mind – had thus laid open Truth to me.

[4] Then, as in mirrors, when the light's behind,
we see, although in sight and thought we've yet
to grasp the fact, the flame of some twin torch

[7] (so turn around to see if that smooth glass
has told the truth and see it does accord,
as words in song when sung upon their beat),

[10] so too did I – my memory now records –
still looking back towards those lovely eyes,
from which, to snare me, love had made the cord.

[13] And once I'd turned – and once my eyes were touched
by what appears within that scroll to those
who look aright within its turning sphere –

[16] a single point I saw, that shot out rays
so sharp the eye on which it fixes fire,
is bound to close against that needle-strength.

[19] Even the star that, seen from here, seems least
would seem, when set beside that point (as star
is set by star), a moon in magnitude.

[22] As close as coroneae, perhaps, appear
around the lights that shape and colour them
hen halo-bearing vapours are most dense,

[25] around that point, to similar extent,
fire in a circle whirled at such great speed
its motion would surpass all clasped round earth.

[28] This was, in orbit, bounded by the next,
by that, a third, the third, then, by a fourth,
by five that four, and then by six that five.

[31] Then, round all these, a seventh ran, so stretched
to generous breadth that Juno's messenger,
the rainbow arc, would hardly hold the all.

[34] Likewise, the eighth and ninth. And each of these

moved still more slowly as the count went on,
running, in number, outward from the one.

[37] And that possessed the clearest flame of all
from which the purest spark stood least far off,
because, I think, that flame in-truthed the most.

[40] My lady, seeing me caught up in hard
concerns, spoke out: 'From that one point
depends both Heaven and all of Nature's world.

[43] Look, in pure wonder, at that circle joined
most nearly to the point, and know it moves
so fast impelled in point of burning love.'

[46] 'Suppose the universe,' I said to her,
'were ordered as I see these wheels to be,
then I would rest well fed with your proposal.

[49] But in the realm of sense experience
the orbits, we can see, are more divine
when these stand furthest from the earth's mid-core.

[52]*-And so if, in this temple, set apart,
its confines marked by love and light alone,
my own desires will ever reach their end,

[55] I need to hear how type and prototype
are not configured in a single mode.
For that I contemplate quite fruitlessly.'

[58] 'It's hardly any miracle if you,
with your own hands, cannot untie that knot.
It's got so stiff since no one works at it!'

[61] These were my lady's words. And then: 'Just get
what I'll now tell you if you want your fill,
and sharpen thought to subtlety round that.

[64] The circling of these bodies, wide or strict,
follow proportioned to the power that flows
diffused in all their parts, here more, here less.

[67] A greater goodness means a greater health.
A greater health is held in greater limbs,
if these, throughout, are perfect equally.

[70] Therefore this sphere – the *Primum Mobile* –
which draws the universe entire along

answers the circle that most loves and knows.

[73] And so if, with your rule, you compass round
the virtue and the strength of what these are,
and not their look, which shows as circular,

[76] you'll see a wonderful coincidence –
according to intelligence in every sphere –
between the less and least, greater and more.'

[79] Compare: when Boreas, the northern wind,
blows from his milder cheek, our hemisphere
is left serene, its air bright, sparkling, clear.

[82]*The crusted scum of clouds that swirled there first
is freed and clarified. The whole sky laughs.
Its many beauties smile round every steeple.

[85] So I became, as – caring for my good –
my lady answered with such clarity,
and truth was seen as stars are in the sky.

[88] And when these words of hers had come to rest,
then, as when boiling iron sparks and spurts,
so, too, these circles flung off their own sparks.

[91]*This surge of fire was following every glint.
These glints, en-thousanding, outnumbered far
progressive doubling of the chessboard squares.

[94]*And rising, choir to choir, I heard 'Hosanna'
sung to that point which, fixed there, holds them all,
and always will, *ubi* they've always been.

[97] And seeing in my mind what doubts I had,
she now declared: 'The circles that I first
made known are Cherubim and Seraphim.

[100] Each runs so swiftly round its twining hoop,
to be as like that point as possible,
succeeding, through sublimity of sight.

[103] And round these run those other forms of love,
known as the Thrones, receiving God's regard.
With these, the first of triads terminates.

[106] And all, as you must know, have their delight
according to how deep their sight goes down
into the truth that calms all intellect.

[109]*You'll see from this that being truly blessed
resides upon the act by which we see,
and not in act of love. This follows that.

[112] And seeing takes its measure from the worth
that grace and truest purpose bring to birth.
And so the scale proceeds from step to step.

[115] The second triad where the sap thus flows
within this sempiternal springtime season –
which night-ascendant Aries never spoils –

[118] sings out perpetually that winter's done,
“Osanna!” in three tunes that sound in three
orders of happiness, each en-threeing here.

[121] The other gods in this hierarchic rank
are firstly Dominations, Virtues next,
then, thirdly, there's the Order of the Powers.

[124] In three-some reels the two penultimates
are Principalities, Archangels, too.
The last of all is all Angelic games.

[127] This order all in wonder gaze above
and triumph so, beneath, that up to God
they all are drawn and draw up all to all.

[130]*And Dionysius with such desire
set out to contemplate these nine-fold ranks
that he defined and named them as I do.

[133] But Gregory departed from his view.
And so, the moment that he reached this sphere,
opening his eyes, he laughed, self-mockingly.

[136] And if, on earth, a mortal could display
a truth so secret, please don't be amazed.
This was revealed by one who saw up here –

[139] and much else of truth from these great gyres.'

Canto 29

[1] Quando ambedue li figli di Latona,
coperti del Montone e de la Libra,
fanno de l'orizzonte insieme zona,

[4] quant' è dal punto che 'l cenit inlibra
infin che l'uno e l'altro da quel cinto,
cambiando l'emisperio, si dilibra,

[7] tanto, col volto di riso dipinto,
si tacque Beatrice, riguardando
fiso nel punto che m'avea vinto.

[10] Poi cominciò: 'Io dico, e non dimando,
quel che tu vuoi udir, perch' io l'ho visto
là 've s'appunta ogni *ubi* e ogni *quando*.

[13] Non per aver a sé di bene acquisto,
ch'esser non può, ma perchè suo splendore
potesse, risplendendo, dir "*Subsisto*",

[16] in sua eternità di tempo fore,
fuor d'ogne altro comprender, come i piacque,
s'aperse in nuovi amor l'eterno amore.

[19] Né prima quasi torpente si giacque;
chè nè prima nè poscia procedette
lo discorrer di Dio sovra quest' acque.

[22] Forma e materia, congiunte e purette,
uscìro ad esser che non avia fallo,
come d'arco tricordo tre saette.

[25] E come in vetro, in ambra o in cristallo
raggio resplende sì, che dal venire
a l'esser tutto non è intervallo,

[28] così 'l triforme effetto del suo sire
ne l'esser suo raggiò insieme tutto
senza distinzione in essordire.

[31] Concreato fu ordine e costruito

a le sustanze; e quelle furon cima
nel mondo in che puro atto fu prodotto;

[34] pura potenza tenne la parte ima;
nel mezzo strinse potenza con atto
tal vime, che già mai non si divima.

[37] Ieronimo vi scrisse lungo tratto
di secoli de li angeli creati
anzi che l'altro mondo fosse fatto;

[40] ma questo vero é scritto in molti lati
da li scrittor de lo Spirito Santo,
e tu te n'avvedrai se bene agguati;

[43] e anche la ragione il vede alquanto,
che non concederebbe che ' motori
sanza sua perfezion fosser cotanto.

[46] Or sai tu dove e quando questi amori
furon creati e come: sì che spenti
nel tuo disio già son tre ardori.

[49] Nè giugneriesi, numerando, al venti
sì tosto, come de li angeli parte
turbò il soggetto d'i vostri alimenti.

[52] L'altra rimase, e cominciò quest' arte
che tu discerni, con tanto diletto,
che mai da circuir non si diparte.

[55] Principio del cader fu il maladetto
superbir di colui che tu vedesti
da tutti i pesi del mondo costretto.

[58] Quelli che vedi qui furon modesti
a riconoscer sé da la bontate
che li avea fatti a tanto intender presti:

[61] per che le viste lor furo essaltate
con grazia illuminante e con lor merto,
si c'hanno ferma e piena volontate;

[64] e non voglio che dubbi, ma sia certo,
che ricever la grazia è meritorio
secondo che l'affetto l'è aperto.

[67] Omai dintorno a questo consistorio
puoi contemplare assai, se le parole

mie son ricolte, sanz' altro aiutorio.

[70] Ma perchè 'n terra per le vostre scole
si legge che l'angelica natura
è tal, che 'ntende e si ricorda e vole,

[73] ancor dirò, perché tu veggi pura
la verità che là giù si confonde,
equivocando in sì fatta lettura.

[76] Queste sustanze, poi che fur gioconde
de la faccia di Dio, non volser viso
da essa, da cui nulla si nasconde:

[79] però non hanno vedere interciso
da novo obietto, e però non bisogna
rememorar per concetto diviso;

[82] sì che là giù, non dormendo, si sogna,
credendo è non credendo dicer vero;
ma ne l'uno è più colpa e più vergogna.

[85] Voi non andate giù per un sentiero
filosofando: tanto vi trasporta
l'amor de l'apparenza e 'l suo pensiero!

[88] E ancor questo qua sù si comporta
con men disdegno che quando è posposta
la divina Scrittura o quando è torta.

[91] Non vi si pensa quanto sangue costa
seminarla nel mondo e quanto piace
chi umilmente con essa s'accosta.

[94] Per apparer ciascun s'ingegna e face
sue invenzioni; e quelle son trascorse
da' predicanti e 'l Vangelio si tace.

[97] Un dice che la luna si ritorse
ne la passion di Cristo e s'interpuose,
per che 'l lume del sol giù non si porse;

[100] e mente, ché la luce si nascose
da sé: però a li Spani e a l'Indi
come a' Giudei tale eclissi rispuose.

[103] Non ha Fiorenza tanti Lapi e Bindi
quante sì fatte favole per anno
in pergamo si gridan quinci e quindi:

[106] sì che le pecorelle, che non sanno,
tornan del pasco pasciute di vento,
e non le scusa non veder lo danno.

[109] Non disse Cristo al suo primo convento:
‘Andate, e predicate al mondo ciance’;
ma diede lor verace fondamento;

[112] e quel tanto sono ne le sue guance,
sì ch’a pagnar per accender la fede
de l’Evangelio fero scudo e lance.

[115] Ora si va con motti e con iscede
a predicare, e pur che ben si rida,
gonfia il cappuccio e più non si richiede.

[118] Ma tale uccel nel becchetto s’annida,
che se ’l vulgo il vedesse, vederebbe
la perdonanza di ch’el si confida:

[121] per cui tanta stoltezza in terra crebbe,
che, senza prova d’alcun testimonio,
ad ogne promession si correrebbe.

[114] Di questo ingrassa il porco sant’ Antonio,
e altri assai che sono ancor più porci,
pagando di moneta senza conio.

[127] Ma perché siam digressi assai, ritorci
li occhi oramai verso la dritta strada,
sì che la via col tempo si raccorci.

[130] Questa natura sì oltre s’ingrada
in numero, che mai non fu loquela
né concetto mortal che tanto vada;

[133] e se tu guardi quel che si revela
per Daniel, vedrai che ’n sue migliaia
determinato numero si cela.

[136] La prima luce, che tutta la raia,
per tanti modi in essa si recepe,
quanti son li splendori a chi s’appaia.

[139] Onde, però che a l’atto che concepe
segue l’affetto, d’amar la dolcezza
diversamente in essa ferve e tepe.

[142] Vedi l’eccelso omai e la larghezza

de l'eterno valor, poscia che tanti
speculi fatti s'ha in che si spezza,
[145] uno manendo in sé come davanti.'

CANTO 29

[1]*When moon and sun, the children of Latona,
covered by Libra and the spring-starred Ram,
each takes, to form its belt, the same horizon,

[4] the length of time from when the zenith comes
to equipoise to when these two, in change
of hemisphere, unbalance in that zone,

[7] was all the time that Beatrice stayed
silent – her laughter brushed across her face,
fixed on the point that first defeated me.

[10] Then she began: ‘I’ll say – though ask, I won’t –
what you now want to hear. I’ve seen it there
where every “when” and “where” attains its point.

[13]* Not seeking any good that He had not –
there can be none – but so his shining-out
could in return shine back and say: “I am”,

[16] in His eternity beyond all time,
beyond our understanding, as He pleased,
to new loves Love Eternal opened out.

[19] Nor had He lain in torpor till that time,
for neither “then” nor “now” could come before
the flowing-forth of God above these waves.

[22] Real form and matter (both conjoined and pure),
issued in being where there was no flaw,
as from a three-string bow three arrows fly.

[25] Light rays that enter amber, crystal, glass,
display such luminescence that, from when
they reach, then *are* there wholly, there’s no pause.

[28] Likewise, the three-fold action of light’s lord
shone brightly through all being, all as one,
without distinction in that opening word.

[31] Rank and relationship were co-created
with these true beings who, within the world
(pure act produced in them), are the very height

[34] where, at the lowest, there’s pure potency,

between these two an intertwining binds
Pure potency to act – and never disentrines.

[37]*Jerome proposed to you a long elapse
of centuries of angels from creation's point
before the other world was ever formed.

[40] The truth is written, though, in many parts –
by writers listening to the Holy Ghost –
as you, if you look carefully, will see.

[43] And even reason can see some of this,
refusing to concede that motive-powers
should be so long without full carry-through.

[46] And now you know the where and when and how
that led to the creation of these loves.

And so, in your desires, three flames are spent.

[49] Counting, you would not get to twice times ten
as quickly as the angels, in some part,
clouded those elements on which you feed.

[52] The rest remained, and then began their art
with such great pleasure that, as you can tell,
they never choose to leave their circlings.

[55] The first cause of the fall was that cursed flounce
of arrogance, in one whom you have seen
gripped tight below the weight of all the world.

[58] The angels you see here restrainedly
acknowledged of themselves the utmost good
who made them quick to understand all this.

[61] Their intellectual sight was, therefore, raised
through merit and illuminating grace
so high that they in will are full and firm.

[64]*And here I would not have you be in doubt.
It is a merit to receive God's grace,
in measure as hearts open up to that.

[67] By now, there's much in this great council hall
that, if my words are safely gathered in,
you may well contemplate without more aid.

[70] But since, down there, your universities
argue that angels are of such a kind

as understand, have memories and free will,

[73] I'll still continue till you see pure truth –
which, in ambiguous lectures there on earth,
is doubtful and so easily confused.

[76] These beings, full of happiness to see
the face of God from which there's none who hide,
at no point turned their eyes away from that.

[79] And so their line of vision is not cut
by new-formed objects, and they, therefore, need
no memory (thought dividing these from thought).

[82] And so, down there, not sleeping, still they dream,
thinking they speak the truth – or thinking not.
The latter brings more guilt and greater shame.

[85] Philosophizing, you, down there, do not
proceed by any one true path. You're swept
along by show and love of showy thoughts.

[88] Yet even this is tolerated here
with less contempt than when God's Holy Writ
as put aside or twisted out of true.

[91] No thought is given to what blood it cost
to sow that seed on earth, nor what delight
is given when we humbly stick to that.

[94] All bend their wits to mere display, and strive
for bright ideas. Then preachers flick-read these,
and, as to what the Gospels say, are mute.

[97] One argues that, when Christ died on the Cross,
the moon turned back to form an obstacle,
so sunlight could not show itself down here.

[100] All lies! The light was hidden by its own free choice.
And that is why the same eclipse replied
to Indians and Spaniards as to Jews.

[103] There aren't, in Florence, half so many wops
as all around in pulpits every year,
such poppycockeries get blurted out.

[106] And so the sheep, who don't know *anything*,
come from the pasture pastured full of wind.
It's no excuse that they don't see the harm.

[109] Christ did not say, to his first holy band,
“Go out and preach pure prattle to the world.”
He gave them true foundations that would stand.

[112] And these resounded in their cheeks so well
that, fighting to ignite the fire of faith,
they used the Gospel as both shield and lance.

[115] Now preachers go with feeble jokes and gags
and, just so long as they can raise a laugh,
their hoods puff up. They ask for nothing more.

[118] A devil bird, though, nestles in their cowls.
Were folk to see this, they would see (they must!)
what sort of pardons these are they so trust.

[121] And so such idiocy grows on earth
that all, without good evidence or proof,
chase after every promise they hear made.

[124]*Pigs of Saint Anthony grow plump on these –
and many others, too, still bigger pigs –
paying with currency that bears no stamp.

[127] But we’ve digressed enough. So turn your eyes
once more towards the road that lies ahead,
so that we cut our path to suit our hours.

[130] In number, the angelic natures climb
so far beyond us that no mortal tongue
nor human thought could ever reach to that.

[133]*And if you note what Daniel has revealed,
you’ll see, while speaking of the “thousands” there,
the final number is concealed from view.

[136] The primal light, whose rays shine out on all,
is taken up in ways as numerous
as there are splendours that it couples with.

[139] Therefore, since depth of feeling follows act,
in each of these the sweetness of their love
seethes differently – and different, too, in warmth.

[142] See now the height and all the generous breadth
of God’s eternal worth. These mirrors all
were made by Him, where He Himself now breaks,

[145] one in Himself remaining as before.’

Canto 30

[1] Forse semilia miglia di lontano
ci ferve l'ora sesta, e questo mondo
china già l'ombra quasi al letto piano,

[4] quando 'l mezzo del cielo, a noi profondo,
comincia a farsi tal, ch'alcuna stella
perde il parere infino a questo fondo;

[7] e come vien la chiarissima ancella
del sol più oltre, così 'l ciel si chiude
di vista in vista infino a la più bella.

[10] Non altrimenti il trionfo che lude
sempre dintorno al punto che mi vinse,
Parendo inchiuso da quel ch'elli 'nchiude,

[13] a poco a poco al mio veder si stinse:
per che tornar con li occhi a Beatrice
ulla vedere e amor mi costrinse.

[16] Se quanto infino a qui di lei si dice
fosse conchiuso tutto in una loda,
poca sarebbe a fornir questa vice.

[19] La bellezza ch'io vidi si trasmoda
non pur di la da noi, ma certo io credo
che solo il suo fattor tutta la goda.

[22] Da questo passo vinto mi concedo
più che già mai da punto di suo tema
soprato fosse comico o tragedo:

[25] ché, come sole in viso che più trema,
così lo rimembrar del dolce riso
la mente mia da me medesmo scema.

[28] Dal primo giorno ch'i' vidi il suo viso
in questa vita, infino a questa vista,
non m'è il seguire al mio cantar preciso;

[31] ma or convien che mio seguir desista

più dietro a sua bellezza, poetando,
come a l'ultimo suo ciascuno artista.

[34] Cotal qual io lascio a maggior bando
che quel de la mia tuba, che deduce
l'ardua sua matera terminando,

[37] con atto e voce di spedito duce
ricominciò: 'Noi siamo usciti fore
del maggior corpo al ciel ch'è pura luce:

[40] luce intellettual, piena d'amore;
amor di vero ben, pien di letizia;
letizia che trascende ogni dolzore.

[43] Qui vederai l'una e l'altra milizia
di paradiso, e l'una in quelli aspetti
che tu vedrai a Pultima giustizia.'

[46] Come subito lampo che discetti
li spiriti visivi, sì che priva
da l'atto l'occhio di più forti obietti,

[49] così mi circumfulse luce viva,
e lasciommi fasciato di tal velo
del suo fulgor, che nulla m'appariva.

[52] . 'Sempre l'amor che queta questo cielo
accoglie in sé con sì fatta salute,
per far disposto a sua fiamma il candelò.'

[55] Non fur più tosto dentro a me venute
queste parole brevi, ch'io compresi
me sormontar di sopr' a mia virtute;

[58] e di novella vista mi raccesi
tale, che nulla luce è tanto mera,
che li occhi miei non si fosser difesi;

[61] e vidi lume in forma di rivera
fulvido di fulgore, intra due rive
dipinte di mirabil primavera.

[64] Di tal fiumana uscian faville vive,
e d'ogne parte si metten ne' fiori,
quasi rubin che oro circunscrive;

[67] poi, come inebriate da li odori,
riprofondavan sé nel miro gurge,

e s'una intrava, un'altra n'uscita fori.

[70] 'L'alto disio che mo t'infiamma e urge,
d'aver notizia di ciò che tu vei,
tanto mi piace più quanto più turge;

[73] ma di quest' acqua convien che tu bei
prima che tanta sete in te si sazi':
così mi disse il sol de li occhi miei.

[76] Anche soggiunse: 'Il flume e li topazi
ch'entrano ed escono e 'l rider de l'erbe
son di lor vero umbriferi prefazi.

[79] Non che da sé sian queste cose acerbe;
ma è difetto da la parte tua,
che non hai viste ancor tanto superbe.'

[82] Non è fantin che sì subito rua
col volto verso il latte, se si svegli
molto tardato da l'usanza sua,

[85] come fec' io, per far migliori specchi
ancor de li occhi, chinandomi a l'onda
che si deriva perché vi s'immegli;

[88] e sì come di lei bevve la gronda
de le palpebre mie, così mi parve
di sua lunghezza divenuta tonda.

[91] Poi, come gente stata sotto larve,
che pare altro che prima, se si sveste
la sembianza non sua in che disparve,

[94] così mi si cambiaro in maggior feste
li fiori e le faville, sì ch'io vidi
ambo le corti del ciel manifeste.

[97] O isplendor di Dio, per cu'io vidi
l'alto triunfo del regno verace,
dammi virtù a dir com' io il vidi!

[100] Lume è là sù che visibile face
lo reatore a quella creatura
che solo in lui vedere ha la sua pace.

[103] E' si distende in circular figura,
in tanto che la sua circonferenza
sarebbe al sol troppo larga cintura.

[106] Fassi di raggio tutta sua parvenza
reflesso al sommo del mobile primo,
che prende quindi vivere e potenza.

[109] E come clivo in acqua di suo imo
si specchia, quasi per vedersi addorno,
quando e nel verde é ne' fioretti opimo,

[112] sì, soprastando al lume intorno intorno,
vidi specchiarsi in più di mille soglie
quanto di noi là sù fatto ha ritorno.

[115] E se l'infimo grado in sé raccoglie
sì grande lume, quanta é la larghezza
di questa rosa ne l'estreme foglie!

[118] La vista mia ne l'ampio e ne l'altezza
non si smarriva, ma tutto prendeva
quanto e 'l quale di quella allegrezza.

[121] Presso e lontano, lì, né pon né leva:
ché dove Dio senza mezzo governa,
la legge natural nulla rileva.

[124] Nel giallo de la rosa sempiterna,
che si digrada e dilata e redole
odor di lode al sol che sempre verna,

[127] qual è colui che tace e dicer vole,
mi trasse Beatrice, e disse: 'Mira
quanto è 'l convento de le bianche stole!

[130] Vedi nostra città quant' ella gira;
vedi li nostri scanni sì ripieni,
che poca gente più ci si disira.

[133] E 'n quel gran seggio a che tu li occhi tieni
per la corona che già v'è sù posta,
prima che tu a queste nozze ceni,

[136] sederà l'alma, che ha giù agosta,
de l'alto Arrigo, ch'a drizzare Italia
verrà in prima ch'ella sia disposta.

[139] La cieca cupidigia che v'ammalia
simili fatti v'ha al fantolino
che muor per fame e caccia via la balia.

[142] E fia prefetto nel foro divino

allora tal, che palese e coverto
non anderà con lui per un cammino.

[145] Ma poco poi sarà da Dio sofferto
nel santo officio; ch'el sarà detruso
là dove Simon mago è per suo merto,

[148] e farà quel d'Alagna intrar più giuso.'

CANTO 30

[1]*Maybe, around six thousand miles away,
the sixth hour, close to noon, flares out, while earth
inclines its shadow-cone to rest, near level.

[4] At this same time, the mid-point of the sky
will start, so deep above us, to transform,
and some stars lose their semblance in those depths.

[7] Then brightest Aurora who serves the sun
advances and, dawning, the skies, vista
by vista, are closed till even the loveliest is gone.

[10] In this way, too, the victories that play
for ever round the point that conquered me –
enclosed, it seems, by that which they enclose –

[13] was, little by little, quenched before my gaze.
And so, from seeing nothing – and in love –
I turned my eyes towards Beatrice.

[16] If all that has, till this, been said of her
were now enclosed to form one word of praise,
it would not, even so, fulfil my need.

[19] The beauty I saw, transcending every kind,
is far beyond us here – nor only us.
Its maker, I think, alone could know its joy.

[22] From now on, I'll admit, I'm overwhelmed,
defeated worse than all before – in comic
or in tragic genre – by what my theme demands.

[25] As sunlight trembles in enfeebled eyes,
calling to mind how sweet to me her smile was,
itself deprives my mind of memory.

[28] Not since the day that I, in our first life,
first saw her face until this living sight,
has song in me been cut so cleanly short.

[31] It is, however, right that I stand down –
as every artist, at the utmost, does –
and no more trace her beauty, forming verse.

[34] And so what then she was I now will leave

to clarions far greater than my trumpet sounds,
and draw my vaunting line towards its end.

[37] As she then was – a guide in word and deed,
her work all done – she spoke again: ‘We’ve left
the greatest of material spheres, rising

[40] to light, pure light of intellect, all love,
the love of good in truth, all happiness,
a happiness transcending every rapture.

[43] Here you will see the two great heavenly ranks,
angels and saints – the saints in countenance
as you, on Judgement Day, will see them stand.’

[46]* As lights, when flashing suddenly, disperse
the spirits of the retina, and rob
the eye of seeing even strong, bright things,

[49] so, bright around me, shone a living light
that left me, baby-like, in swaddling weaves
of brilliance, so that nothing showed to me.

[52] ‘The love that gives this Heaven its quietness
will always make its saving welcome thus,
to form a candle ready for its flame.’

[55] No sooner had these brief words entered me
than I rose up – as truly I could tell –
above the summit of my natural powers.

[58] New seeing-strength I kindled in myself,
so that no light, however crystalline,
could cause my eyes to close in self-defence.

[61] I saw light form a river in full spate,
fire-dazzle-gilded, flowing through verges
painted afresh in colours of wonderful spring.

[64] And rising from that flood, alive, were sparks
that everywhere alighted on the flowers,
like rubies set in gold encirclements –

[67] then all, as though the perfumes made them drunk,
plunged in that swirling miracle once more.
And yet where one sank in, still more spun out.

[70] ‘The fine desire that fires and urges you
to gain still fuller news of all you see,

delights me more, the more the longing swells.

[73] And yet before your thirst is satisfied,
you'll need to drink these waters to the full.'

Those words were hers, the sunlight of my eyes.

[76] Then following: 'The river and the glint
of topaz, in and out, the smile of grass – these all are
shadowed prefaces that hint at their own truth.

[79] That does not mean that any is, itself,
unripe, acid or green. The lack is yours.
Your sight as yet cannot move proudly on.'

[82] No baby, waking later from its nap
than normally it would, so hurled itself
face down to mother's milk as I did now.

[85] To make my eyes, as mirrors, better still,
I bent towards the wave that, flowing there,
will sweep us always onward to in-bettering.

[88] I drank to the arching eaves of my brow,
and then saw all anew, as though that length
of light had now, in form, become a round.

[91] If masqueraders, hidden in their veils,
undress those features (not their own) in which
they'd vanished once, their look seems somehow changed.

[94]*So now, it seemed, these flowers and flecks of light
altered, to join and celebrate still more.

And I saw, now made known, both heavenly courts.

[97] Splendour of God! Through you I came to see
triumph exalting in the realm of truth.

Grant me true strength to say what then I saw.

[100] There is, above us there, a light that makes
the All-Creator in creation seen
by those who only seeing Him have peace.

[103] This light became a circle in its form,
extending its circumference so far
as might a belt too generous round the sun.

[106] All that appears is made there by a ray
reflected from the curve of that First Sphere
which draws its life and movings from that light.

[109] It is as though the incline of some hill
were mirrored in a lake below, as if
to view itself adorned in flower and richest green.

[112] Above that light, and standing round, I saw
a thousand tiers or more as mirrorings
of those of ours who've now returned up there.

[115] Imagine, when the least of all these grades
could gather to itself so great a light,
how great the wealth is at the rose's fringe.

[118] My eyes, despite such breadth and altitude,
were not confused or blurred but took all in –
the kind and sum of this light-heartedness.

[121] Nothing's gained here or lost by 'near' and 'far'.
For where God rules without some means between,
the law of nature bears no weight at all.

[124] Into the gold of that now-always rose,
which grows from arc to arc, dilates and breathes
the scent of praise to always-springtime Sun,

[127] she drew me – Beatrice – like someone
yearning, while silent, to say: 'The wonder!
Look there, how great this white-caped gathering is!'

[130] Our city, look! And see how wide it sweeps.
The honoured places – look! – they're almost full,
and few we long to see are still to come.

[133]*Your eyes are fixed upon a single throne,
drawn by the crown already set on that.

And long before you join this marriage feast,

[136] the soul will sit – imperial in the world –
of noble Arrigo, who came to rule
an Italy unready for him yet.

[139] The blind cupidity bewitching you
has made you all akin to little brats
who – famished, dying – still beat off their nurse.

[142]*And in the Sacred Forum one presides
whose public and whose covert deeds will not
accord or travel in a single groove.

[145] But not for long. God will not suffer him

to keep that sacred role. He'll soon be flung
where Simon Magus gets what he deserves.

[148] The Anagnese Pope will sink still further down.'

Canto 31

[1] In forma dunque di Candida rosa
mi si mostrava la milizia santa
he nel suo sangue Cristo fece sposa;

[4] ma l'altra, che volando vede e canta
la gloria di colui che la 'nnamora
e la bontà che la fece cotanta,

[7] sì come schiera d'ape che s'infiora
una fiata e una si ritorna
là dove suo laboro s'insapora,

[10] nel gran fior discendeva che s'addorna
di tante foglie, e quindi risaliva
là dove 'l suo amor sempre soggiorna.

[13] Le facce tutte avean di fiamma viva
e l'ali d'oro, e l'altro tanto bianco,
che nulla neve a quel termine arriva.

[16] Quando scendean nel fior, di banco in banco
porgevan de la pace e de l'ardore
ch'elli acquistavan ventilando il fianco.

[19] Né l'interporsi tra 'l disopra e 'l fiore
di tanta moltitudine volante
impediva la vista e lo splendore:

[22] ché la luce divina è penetrante
per l'universo secondo ch'è degno,
sì che nulla le puote essere ostante.

[25] Questo sicuro e gaudioso regno,
frequente in gente antica e in novella,
viso e amore avea tutto ad un segno.

[28] O trina luce che 'n unica stella
scintillando a lor vista, sì li appaga!
guarda qua giuso a la nostra procella!

[31] Se i barbari, venendo da tal plaga

che ciascun giorno d'Elice si cuopra,
rotante col suo figlio ond' ella è vaga,

[34] veggendo Roma e l'ardua sua opra,
stupefaciensi, quando Laterano
a le cose mortali andò di sopra;

[37] io, che al divino da l'umano,
a l'eterno dal tempo era venuto,
e di Fiorenza in popol giusto e sano,

[40] di che stupor dovea esser compiuto!
Certo tra esso e 'l gaudio mi facea
libito non udire e starmi muto.

[43] E quasi peregrin che si ricrea
nel tempio del suo voto riguardando,
e spera già ridir com' ello stea,

[46] su per la viva luce passeggiando,
menava io li occhi per li gradi,
mo sù, mo giù e mo recirculando.

[49] Vedeà visi a carità suadi,
d'altrui lume fregiati e di suo riso,
e atti ornati di tutte onestadi.

[52] La forma general di paradiso
già tutta mio sguardo avea compresa,
in nulla parte ancor fermato fiso;

[55] e volgeami con voglia riaccesa
per domandar la mia donna di cose
di che la mente mia era sospesa.

[58] Uno intendeà, e altro mi rispuose:
credea veder Beatrice e vidi un sene
vestito con le genti gloriose.

[61] Diffuso era per li occhi e per le gene
di benigna letizia, in atto pio
quale a tenero padre si convene.

[64] E 'Ov' è ella?', sùbito diss' io.
Ond' elli: 'A terminar lo tuo disiro
mosse Beatrice me del loco mio;

[67] e se riguardi sù nel terzo giro
dal sommo grado, tu la rivedrai

nel trono che suoi meriti le sortiro.’

[70] Senza risponder, li occhi sù levai,
e vidi lei che si faceva corona
reflettendo da sé li eterni rai.

[73] Da quella region che più sù tona
occhio mortale alcun tanto non dista,
qualunque in mare più giù s’abbandona,

[76] quanto lì da Beatrice la mia vista;
ma nulla mi faceva, ché sua effige
non discendea a me per mezzo mista.

[79] ‘O donna in cui la mia speranza vige,
e che soffristi per la mia salute
in inferno lasciar le tue vestige,

[82] di tante cose quant’ i’ ho vedute,
dal tuo podere e da la tua bontate
riconosco la grazia e la virtute.

[85] Tu m’hai di servo tratto a libertate
per tutte quelle vie, per tutt’ i modi
che di ciò fare avei la potestate.

[88] La tua magnificenza in me custodi,
sì che l’anima mia, che fatt’ hai sana,
piacente a te dal corpo si disnodi.’

[91] Così orai; e quella, sì lontana
come pareva, sorrise e riguardommi;
poi si tornò a l’eterna fontana.

[94] E ’l santo sene: ‘Acciò che tu assommi
perfettamente’, disse, ‘il tuo cammino,
a che priego e amor santo mandommi,

[97] vola con li occhi per questo giardino;
ché veder lui t’acconcerà lo sguardo
più al montar per lo raggio divino.

[100] E la regina del cielo, ond’ io ardo
tutto d’amor, ne farâ ogni grazia,
però ch’i’ sono il suo fedel Bernardo.’

[103] Qual è colui che forse di Croazia
viene a veder la Veronica nostra,
che per l’antica fame non sen sazia,

[106] ma dice nel pensier, fin che si mostra:
'Segnor mio Iesù Cristo, Dio verace,
or fu sì fatta la sembianza vostra?'

[109] tal era io mirando la vivace
carità di colui che 'n questo mondo,
contemplando, gustò di quella pace,

[112] 'Figliuol di grazia, quest' esser giocondo',
cominciò elli, 'non ti sarà noto,
tenendo li occhi pur qua giù al fondo;

[115] ma guarda i cerchi infino al più remoto,
tanto che veggi seder la regina
cui questo regno è suddito e devoto.'

[118] Io levai li occhi; e come da mattina
la parte oriental de l'orizzonte
soverchia quella dove 'l sol declina,

[121] così, quasi di valle andando a monte
con li occhi, vidi parte ne lo stremo
vincer di lume tutta l'altra fronte.

[114] E come quivi ove s'aspetta il temo
che mal quidò Fetonte, più s'infiamma,
e quindi e quindi il lume si fa scemo,

[117] così quella pacifica oriafiamma
nel mezzo s'awivava, e d'ogne parte
per igual modo allentava la fiamma;

[130] e a quel mezzo, con le penne sparte,
vid' io più di mille angeli festanti,
ciascun distinto di fulgore e d'arte.

[133] Vidi a lor giochi quivi e a lor canti
ridere una bellezza, che letizia
era ne li occhi a tutti li altri santi;

[136] e s'io avessi in dir tanta divizia
quanta ad imaginar, non ardirei
lo minimo tentar di sua delizia.

[139] Bernardo, come vide li occhi miei
nel caldo suo caler fissi e attenti,
ll suoi con tanto affetto volse a lei,

[142] che ' miei di rimirar fê più ardenti.

CANTO 31

[1] In form, then, as a rose, pure, brilliant, white,
there stood before me now the sacred ranks
that Christ, by His own blood, has made His bride.

[4] The other force that, flying, sees and sings
the glory that so stirs their love of Him –
the goodness, too, that makes them all they are –

[7] came down, as might a swarm of bees that first
en-flower themselves, returning, afterwards,
to where their efforts are made sweet to taste.

[10] They search the utmost depths of that great flower,
with all its many petals. Then they rise
once more to where their love will always dwell.

[13] Their faces all were bright with living flame,
their wings of gold, their other parts so white
that snow has never reached to that extreme.

[16] Descending in the flower from tier to tier,
they offered peace and all the burning love
that they won there (wings fanning down their flanks).

[19] Nor, interposed between the flower and height,
did all that multitude in flight impede
that radiance or the faculties of sight.

[22] Divine light pierces through the universe –
to be received, as fit, in all degrees –
in such a way that nothing can oppose.

[25] That realm – its *gaudeamus* free of strife –
where chosen, past and new, such crowds resort,
aims all its love and seeing at one sign.

[28] O three-fold light that, in one single star,
so flashing in their sight brings them content!
Look down upon our world of squalls and storms.

[31]*If savages from northern shores (where skies
are dark, day in, day out, under the Helicean sign
that gazes, wheeling, on her well-loved son)

[34] at seeing Rome and her aspiring works

are stupefied to view the Lateran,
soaring so high above all mortal things,

[37] then what of me – from human to divine,
coming to this eternal realm from time,
from Florence to a nation sane and true –

[40] what pure astonishment must I have felt?
Indeed, between that shock and solemn joy,
I, gladly, did not hear or speak a thing.

[43] As pilgrims gaze, enthralled at their new life,
around the temple that they'd vowed to reach,
hoping to tell, already, where they've been,

[46] so, pacing upwards through the living light,
I drew my eyes through every step and grade
now up, now lower, circling all around.

[49] I saw there faces swayed to *caritas*,
arrayed in their own smiles and light not theirs,
and all they did adorned with dignity.

[52] The general form of Heaven had by now
been grasped entirely as my glance swept round,
fixing, though, firmly no particular.

[55] And so I turned – my will once more on fire –
to ask that she, my lady, should respond.

(For here and there, some doubt in me remained.)

[58] I'd looked for one thing. Something else replied.
I'd see Beatrice, as I believed,
and saw an elder, robed like all in glory.

[61] Around his countenance and eyes there flowed
the generosity of joy, his look
a gentle father's, firm and virtuous.

[64] And I at once: 'Where is she?' And at this:
'So I can bring an end to your desire,
Beatrice moved me from the place I keep.

[67] If, to the highest round of that third step,
you'll raise your eyes, you'll see her on the throne
to which her merits have allotted her.'

[70] Without reply, I raised my eyes up there
and saw her, mirroring eternal rays,

to form a crown or aureole around.

[73] From that high region where the thunder rolls,
no mortal eye could ever be so far –
though sunk beneath the ocean's utmost depth –

[76] as my sight was from Beatrice now.
Yet that meant nothing. For her image came
not blurred or lessened by the space between.

[79] 'In you, beloved, my hope grows strong. All this
you bore: To greet me and to make me whole,
you left your footprint in the depth of Hell.

[82] The inward strength and grace of everything
I since have seen has come to me, I know,
through you, your goodness and your grace and power.

[85] From servitude you've led me to be free
by all those pathways and by all the means
you have within your power to exercise.

[88] Keep safe in me your own magnificence,
so that my soul, since you have made it well,
should leave the knot of body, pleasing you.'

[91] My prayer was thus. And she, as far away
as she might seem, smiled and looked down at me,
then turned again towards the eternal spring.

[94] The holy patriarch: 'So you may perfectly
attain the summit of the path you take
(for that I'm sent, by prayer and holy love),

[97] fly through this garden with your wings of sight,
for seeing this will make your gaze more fit
to climb towards the radiance of God.

[100] The Heavenly Queen – I burn in all my soul.
for love of her – will bring us every grace.
I am Bernardo, her most faithful one.'

[103]* Like someone coming from Croatia, say,
to view our Veil – the Saint Veronica –
who still can't satisfy the age-old ache

[106] and, while the image is displayed to him,
will murmur in his thoughts: 'My Lord, Christ Jesus,
was this the way, true God, you looked on earth?'

[109] so I – with wondering eyes on that bright life
of *caritas* who, contemplating, caught
some taste, within our world, of final peace.

[112] ‘Child born of grace’ (so he began) ‘if you m
continue with your eyes still fixed below,
you’ll hear no note of this bright, joyful state.

[115] Look through these circles to the furthest off
so far that you shall see, enthroned, the queen
to whom this realm is subject in its vows.’

[118] I raised my eyes. And, as when morning dawns,
the orient horizon in new light
defeats the part in which the sun goes down,

[121] so too, as though my eyes were travelling m
from valley up to mountain peak, I saw
the rim outdo, in brightness, every other part.

[124]*As sky flares fiercest where the chariot pole –
mis-turned by Phaeton once – is waited for,
the light diminishing on either side,

[127]*so did that oriflamme (peace-pennant now)
grow bright within its central spur, as flame,
elsewhere, in equal measure, slacked and dimmed.

[130] And, in the central band, their wings outspread,
I saw, in thousands, angels – feasting, dancing –
in blaze and chosen deed all differing.

[133]*I saw there, smiling on their games and songs,
the height of Beauty who, as height of Joy,
was there in all the eyes of all the saints.

[136] And even if, in words, I had such wealth
as, in imagining, I did, I’d still not dare
attempt to say the least of that delight.

[139] Bernardo, seeing where my eyes were set,
fixed, won, attentive to her warm regard,
now turned his own so feelingly to her

[142] that mine in wonder blazed out all the more.

Canto 32

[1] Affetto al suo piacer, quel contemplante
libero officiodi dottore assunse,
e cominciò queste parole sante:

[4] ‘La piaga che Maria richiuse e unse,
quella ch’è tanto bella da’ suoi piedi
è colei che l’aperse eche la punse.

[7] Ne l’ordine che fanno i terzi sedi,
siede Rachel di sotto da costei
con Beatrice, sì come tu vedi.

[10] Sarra e Rebecca, Iudìt ecolei
che fu bisava al cantor che per doglia
del fallo disse “*Miserere mei*”,

[13] puoi tu veder così di soglia in soglia
giù digradar, com’ io ch’a proprio nome
vo per la rosa giù di foglia in foglia.

[16] E dal settimo grado in giù, sì come
infino ad esso, succedono Ebree,
dirimendo del nor tutte le chiome;

[19] perché, secondo lo sguardo che fée
la fede in Cristo, queste sono il muro
a che si parton le sacre scalee.

[22] Da questa parte onde ’l fiore è maturo
di tutte le sue foglie, sono assisi
quei che credettero in Cristo venturo;

[25] da l’altra parte onde sono intercisi
di vòti i semicirculi, si stanno
uei ch’a Cristo venuto ebber li visi.

[28] E come quinci il glorioso scanno
de la donna del cielo e li altri scanni
di sotto lui cotanta cerna fanno,

[31] così di contra quel del gran Giovanni,

che sempre santo 'l deserto e'l martiro
sofferse, e poi l'inferno da due anni;

[34] e sotto lui così cerner sortiro
Francesco, Benedetto e Augustino
e altri fin qua giù di giro in giro.

[37] Or mira l'alto proveder divino:
ché l'uno e l'altro aspetto de la fede
igualmente empierà questo giardino.

[40] E sappi che dal grado in giù che fiede
a mezzo il tratto le due discrezioni,
per nullo proprio merito si siede,

[43] ma per l'altrui, con certe condizioni:
ché tutti questi son spiriti ascolti
prima ch'avesser vere elezioni.

[46] Ben te ne puoi accorger per li volti
e anche per le voci puerili,
se tu li guardi bene e se li ascolti.

[49] Or dubbi tu e dubitando sili;
ma io discioglierò 'l forte legame
in che ti stringon li pensier sottili.

[52] Dentro a l'ampiezza di questo reame
casüal punto non puote aver sito,
se non come tristizia o sete o fame:

[55] ché per eterna legg è stabilito
quantunque vedi, sì che giustamente
ci si risponde da l'anello al dito;

[58] e però questa festinata gente
a vera vita non è *sine causa*
intra sé qui più emeno eccellente.

[61] Lo rege per cui questo regno pausa
in tanto amore ein tanto diletto,
che nulla volontà è di più ausa,

[64] le menti tutte nel suo lieto aspetto
creando, a suo piacer di grazia dota
diversamente; e qui basti l'effetto.

[67] E ciò espresso e chiaro vi si nota
ne la Scrittura santa in quei gemelli

che ne la madre ebber l'ira commota.

[70] Però, secondo il color d'i capelli,
di cotal grazia l'altissimo lume
degnamente convien che s'incappelli.

[73] Dunque, senza mercé di lor costume,
locati son per gradi differenti,
sol differendo nel primiero acume.

[76] Bastavasi ne' secoli recenti
con l'innocenza, per aver salute,
solamente la fede d'i parenti;

[79] poi che le prime etadi fuor compiute,
convenne ai maschi a l'innocenti penne
per circuncidere acquistar virtute;

[82] ma poi che 'l tempo de la grazia venne,
senza battesimo perfetto di Cristo
tale innocenza là giù si ritenne.

[85] Riguarda omai ne la faccia che a Cristo
più si somiglia, chè la sua chiarezza
sola ti può disporre a veder Cristo.'

[88] Io vidi sopra lei tanta allegrezza
piover, portata ne le menti sante
create a trasvolar per quella altezza,

[91] che quantunque io avea visto davante,
di tanta ammirazion non mi sospese,
né mi mostrò di Dio tanto sembiante;

[94] e quello amor che primo lì discese,
cantando '*Ave, Maria, gratia plena*',
dinanzi a lei le sue ali distese.

[97] Rispuose a la divina cantilena
da tutte parti la beata corte,
sì ch'ogne vista sen fé più serena.

[100] 'O santo padre, che per me comporte
l'esser qua giù, lasciando il dolce loco
nel qual tu siedi per etterna sorte,

[103] qual è quell' angel che con tanto gioco
guarda ne li occhi la nostra regina,
innamorato sì che par di foco?'

[106] Così ricorsi ancora a la dottrina
di colui ch'abbelliva di Maria,
come del sole stella mattutina.

[109] Ed elli a me: 'Baldezza e leggiadria
quant' esser puote in angelo e in alma,
tutta è in lui; e sì volem che sia,

[112] perch' elli è quelli che portò la palma
giuso a Maria, quando 'l Figliuol di Dio
carcar si volse de la nostra salma.

[115] Ma vieni omai con li occhi sì com' io
andrò parlando, enota i gran patrici
di questo imperio giustissimo e pio.

[118] Quei due che seggon là sù più felici
per esser propinquissimi ad Agusta,
son d'esta rosa quasi due radici:

[121] colui che da sinistra le s'aggiusta
è il padre per lo cui ardito gusto
l'umana specie tanto amaro gusta;

[124] dal destro vedi quel padre vetusto
di Santa Chiesa a cui Cristo le chiavi
raccomandò di questo nor venusto.

[127] E quei che vide tutti i tempi gravi,
pria che morisse, de la bella sposa
che s'acquistò con la lancia ecoi clavi,

[130] siede lung'h' esso, elungo l'altro posa
quel duca sotto cui visse di manna
la gente ingrata, mobile e retrosa.

[133] Di contr' a Pietro vedi sedere Anna,
tanto contenta di mirar sua figlia,
che non move occhio per cantare osanna;

[136] e contro al maggior padre di famiglia
siede Lucia, che mosse la tua donna
quando chinavi, a rovinar, le ciglia.

[139] Ma perché 'l tempo fugge che t'assonna,
qui farem punto, come buon sartore
che com' elli ha del panno fa la gonna;

[142] e drizzeremo li occhi al primo amore,

sì che, guardando verso lui, penètri
quant' è possibil per lo suo fulgore.

[145] Veramente, *ne* forse tu t'arresti
movendo l'ali tue, credendo oltrarti,
orando grazia conven che s'impetri

[148] grazia da quella che puote aiutarti;
e tu mi seguirai con l'affezione,
sì che dal dicer mio lo cor non parti.'

[152] E cominciò questa santa orazione:

CANTO 32

[1] Heart-whole in pleasure, the contemplative
freely took on himself the teacher's role,
beginning thus the holy words he spoke:

[4] 'The gash that Mary healed and soothed with oil
was opened first, and then made worse, by her
who sits, so beautiful, at Mary's feet.

[7]* Ranked in the order that the third thrones form,
below Eve, Rachel sits. And then along
from Rachel, as you see, is Beatrice.

[10] Sara, Rebecca, Judith and the one
who bore the mother of the man who sang,
mourning his fault, the "*Miserere mei*".

[13] Descending step to step, you see all these
as I, in giving each her name, proceed,
now travelling down this rose from leaf to leaf.

[16] And downward from the seventh of these tiers
(as down to that) the Hebrew women come,
dividing all the curls within that flower.

[19] And these (according to the way their faith
in Christ looked back or forth) here form the wall
that separates the sacred steps in two.

[22] On that side, where the flower is fully grown,
with all its petals at their full extent,
sit those who showed belief in Christ to come.

[25] There on the other side, where unfilled space
still intersects the hemispheres, are those
who turned their countenance to Christ now come.

[28] And where, on this side, there's the glorious throne
of Heaven's own Lady and, below, those seats
that, under hers, divide the rose in two,

[31]*-so, too, across from that, there sits great John.
That saint bore desert and cruel martyrdom,
then, after – till Christ came – two years in Hell

[34] And under him, elected to divide,

Saint Francis, Benedict, Augustine, too,
with others down to here, from rank to rank.

[37] Look up in wonder at God's providence.
He'll fill this garden to the same extent
with those who kept the faith in these two ways.

[40] Know, too, that from the rung that, midway, strikes
the line that marks these two divisions off,
no one will sit by merit of their own –

[43] of others, rather, where conditions hold.
For all of these are spirits loosed from earth
before they, truly, could conceive free choice.

[46] And this, if you will look and listen hard,
will be entirely clear to you. Just note
their faces. Hear, as well, their children-voice.

[49] Now you're in doubt and, doubting, do not speak.
But I shall disentangle this tight knot,
which your own subtle reasonings have tied.

[52] Within the broad expanse of all this realm
there cannot be a single point that's chance,
nor any hunger, thirst or misery.

[55] For all that you may see is here decreed
by God's eternal law. Hence, right and fit,
all corresponds as finger to a ring.

[58] And so it is that, not without good cause,
these children – sped too soon to this true life –
are in their excellences less and more.

[61] The king, through whom this kingdom is at peace,
in such great love, and in such pure delight,
that nothing in our wills dare aim so high,

[64] creating, in his look of happiness,
all minds, bestowed, as he best pleased, his grace
in different ways. The outcome says enough.

[67]*And this, expressed and clear in Holy Writ,
is noted in the case of those two twins
who, in their mother's womb, were moved to wrath.

[70] It follows from the colour of their hair
to what degree of grace the highest light

encrowns most fittingly the head of each.

[73] Therefore, with no regard to how they act,
these are placed here in differing degrees
by difference only of their first sharp sight.

[76] In earliest times, it used to be enough,
to gain salvation, that with innocence
parental faith alone should be conjoined.

[79]*Then, when these early epochs were complete,
all males were circumcised to win them powers
appropriate to their wings of innocence.

[82] But, later, when the age of grace arrived,
such innocence – when baptism in Christ
was not fulfilled – was bound on Hell's first rim.

[85] Return now. See that face resembling Christ
closer than all. For that bright light alone
can make you wholly fit to look on Christ.'

[88] I saw such happiness rain down on her,
borne by those holy intellects – made first
to fly with wings across that heavenly height –

[91] that nothing I had ever seen before
had brought my wondering eyes to such a poise,
nor shown so much to me of how God looks.

[94]*And that first angel-love, descending there,
was singing – wings extended in her sight –
'*Ave Maria gratia plena*'.

[97] There answered this the sacred cantilene
from every region of the happy court.

At which, their faces showed the more serene.

[100] 'O holy father, who for me could bear
to be down here and leave that lovely place
where, as eternally decreed, you sit,

[103] which is that angel who, with such delight,
looks at our Queen and gazes in her eyes
so deep in love he seems to be on fire?'

[106] I went, in this way, back to learn from him
of one who drew his beauty from Maria,
as, from the sun, the morning star draws light.

[109] ‘All prowess, charm and elegance of heart
as may appear in angels or men’s souls
is found in him, and we all wish it so.

[112] For he it is who carried down the palm
to Mary when the only Son of God
chose to take on the weight of human form.

[115] But come now, note and follow with your eyes,
as I go speaking, all the noble sires
of this supremely true imperium.

[118] These two who sit above – the happiest,
in being nearest to the Empress throne –
are as the double root-stock of this rose.

[121] He who sits next in justice, to her left,
is that first father through whose reckless taste
the human species tasted so much gall.

[124] There on the right you see the honoured sire
of Holy Church to whom Christ left in trust
the keys to this most delicate of flowers.

[127]*-And he who saw, before he came to die,
the heavy times of that beloved bride,
first won upon the Cross with lance and nails,

[130]*sits next to him, and next to him now rests
that lord beneath whose guidance there once lived
a race ungrateful, shifting, obstinate.

[133]*-Across from Peter, as you see, sits Anne,
so happy as she wonders at her child
she does not move her eyes to sing “Hosannah”.

[136] *-And facing Adam, father of our tribe,
Lucia sits. When you, in ruin, bent your brows,
Lucia moved that *donna* to your aid.

[139] But since your time of slumber races by,
at this point we shall end, as tailors do –
who skilfully make skirts from little cloth.

[142] And turn your eyes towards the Primal Love,
so that, in looking there, your eye should pierce
as far as possible His dazzling light.

[145] But lest it be, perhaps, on your frail wings,

thinking you rise beyond, you sink back down,
it's best that, praying for the gift of grace,
[148] you beg for grace from her who can assist.
And here you'll follow me with such good heart
that from my words your feelings won't depart.'
[151] And so he now began his holy prayer

Canto 33

[1] 'Vergine Madre, figlia del tuo figlio,
umile e alta più che creatura,
termine fisso d'eterno consiglio,

[4] tu se' colei che l'umana natura
nobilitasti sì, che 'l suo fattore
non disdegnò di farsi sua fattura.

[7] Nel ventre tuo si raccese l'amore,
per lo cui caldo ne l'eterna pace
così è germinato questo fiore.

[10] Qui se' a noi meridiana face
di caritate, e giuso, intra 'mortali,
se' di speranza fontana vivace.

[13] Donna, se' tanto grande e tanto vali,
che qual vuol grazia e a te non ricorre,
sua disianza vuol volar sanz' ali.

[16] La tua benignità non pur soccorre
a chi domanda, ma molte fiате
liberamente al dimandar precorre.

[19] In te misericordia, in te pietate,
in te magnificenza, in te s'aduna
quantunque in creatura è di bontate.

[22] Or questi, che da l'infima lacuna
de l'universo infin qui ha vedute
le vite spirituali ad una ad una,

[25] supplica a te, per grazia, di virtute
tanto, che possa con li occhi levarsi
più alto verso l'ultima salute.

[28] E io, che mai per mio veder non arsi
più ch'i' fo per lo suo, tutti miei prieghi
ti porgo, e priego che non sieno scarsi,

[31] perché tu ogne nube li dislegghi

di sua mortalità co' prieghi tuoi,
sì che 'l sommo piacer li si dispieghi.

[34] Ancor ti priego, regina, che puoi
ciò che tu vuoi, che conservi sani,
dopo tanto veder, li affetti suoi.

[37] Vinca tua guardia i movimenti umani:
vedi Beatrice con quanti beati
per li miei prieghi ti chiudon le mani!'

[40] Li occhi da Dio dilette e venerati,
fissi ne l'orator, ne dimostraro
quanto i devoti prieghi le son grati;

[43] indi a l'eterno lume s'addrizzaro,
nel qual non si dee creder che s'invii
per creatura l'occhio tanto chiaro.

[46] E io ch'al fine di tutt' i disii
appropinquava, sì com' io dovea,
l'ardor del desiderio in me finii.

[49] Bernardo m'accennava, e sorridea,
perch' io guardassi suso; ma io era
già per me stesso tal qual ei volea:

[52] ché la mia vista, venendo sincera,
e più e più intrava per lo raggio
de l'alta luce che da sé è vera.

[55] Da quinci innanzi il mio veder fu maggio
che 'l parlar mostra, ch'a tal vista cede,
e cede la memoria a tanto oltraggio.

[58] Qual è colui che sognando vede,
che dopo 'l sogno la passione impressa
rimane, e l'altro a la mente non riede,

[61] cotal son io, ché quasi tutta cessa
mia visione, e ancor mi distilla
nel core il dolce che nacque da essa.

[64] Così la neve al sol si disigilla;
Così al vento ne le foglie levi
si perdea la sentenza di Sibilla.

[67] O somma luce che tanto ti levi
da' concetti mortali, a la mia mente

ripresta un poco di quel che parevi,

[70] e fa la lingua mia tanto possente,
ch'una favilla sol de la tua gloria
possa lasciare a la futura gente;

[73] ché, per tornare alquanto a mia memoria
e per sonare un poco in questi versi,
più si concepera di tua vittorià.

[76] Io credo, per l'acume ch'io sofferarsi
del vivo raggio, ch'i' sarei smarrito,
se li occhi miei da lui fossero aversi.

[79] E' mi ricorda ch'io fui più ardito
per questo a sostener, tanto ch'i' giunsi
l'aspetto mio col valore infinite

[82] Oh abbondante grazia ond' io presunsi
ficcar lo viso per la luce etterna,
tanto che la veduta vi consunsi!

[85] Nel suo profondo vidi che s'interna,
legato con amore in un volume,
ciò che per l'universo si squaderna:

[88] sustanze e accidenti e lor costume
quasi conflati insieme, per tal modo
che ciò ch'i' dico è un semplice lume.

[91] La forma universal di questo nodo
credo ch'i' vidi, perché più di largo,
dicendo questo, mi sento ch'i' godo.

[94] Un punto solo m'è maggior letargo
che venticinque secoli a la 'mpresa
che fé Nettuno ammirar l'ombra d'Argo.

[97] Così la mente mia, tutta sospesa,
mirava fissa, immobile e attenta,
e sempre di mirar faceasi accesa.

[100] A quella luce cotal si diventa,
che volgersi da lei per altro aspetto
è impossibil che mai si consenta;

[103] perè chè 'l ben, ch'e del volere obietto,
tutto s'accoglie in lei, e fuor di quella
è defettivo ciò ch'è lì perfetto.

[106] Omai sarà più corta mia favella,
pur a quel ch'io ricordo, che d'un fante
che bagni ancor la lingua a la mammella.

[109] Non perché più ch'un semplice semblante
fosse nel vivo lume ch'io mirava,
che tal è sempre qual s'era davante;

[112] ma per la vista che s'avvalorava
in me guardando, una sola parvenza,
mutandom' io, a me si travagliava.

[115] Ne la profonda e chiara sussistenza
de l'alto lume parvermi tre giri
di tre colori e d'una contenenza;

[118] e l'un da l'altro come iri da iri
parea riflesso, e 'l terzo pareva foco
che quinci e quindi igualmente si spiri.

[121] Oh quanto è corto il dire e come fioco
al mio concetto! e questo, a quel ch'i' vidi,
è tanto, che non basta a dicer 'poco'.

[124] O luce eterna che sola in te sidi,
sola t'intendi, e da te intelletta
e intendente te ami e arridi!

[127] Quella circolazion che sì concetta
pareva in te come lume riflesso,
da li occhi miei alquanto circunspetta,

[130] dentro da sé, del suo colore stesso,
mi parve pinta de la nostra effige:
per che 'l mio viso in lei tutto era messo.

[133] Qual è 'l geomètra che tutto s'affige
per misurar lo cerchio, e non ritrova,
pensando, quel principio ond' elli indige,

[136] tal era io a quella vista nova:
veder voleva come si convenne
l'imgo al cerchio e come vi s'indova;

[139] ma non eran da ciò le proprie penne:
se non che la mia mente fu percossa
da un fulgore in che sua voglia venne.

[142] A l'alta fantasia qui mancò possa;

ma già volgeva il mio disio e 'l *velle*,
sì come rota ch'igualmente è mossa,
[145] I'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle.

CANTO 33

[1] 'Virgin and mother, daughter of your son,
greater than all in honour and humility,
you are the point that truth eternally

[4] is fixed upon. And you have made the nature
of the human being proud. Its maker, then,
did not disdain to make himself his making.

[7] Love, in your womb, was fanned to fire again.
And here, in this eternal peace, the warmth of love
has brought the Rose to germinate and bloom.

[10] You are, for us, the noon-time torch of love.
You are, among those mortals there below,
the clearest fountain of their living hopes.

[13] You are, in dignity and power, Our Lady.
All who, in wanting grace, do not seek help
from you, might wish to soar yet lack the wings.

[16] Nor in your kindness do you give your aid
to those alone who ask, but often run,
before they ask, to them in generous freedom.

[19] In you is pity, in you compassion,
in you all-giving power. All good in you
is gathered up that creature form can bear.

[22] This man is one who, from the deepest void
in all the universe, has seen thus far,
and one by one, all lives in spirit mode.

[25] To you, a suppliant, he comes, and asks
that, by your grace, he gains the strength to rise
in sight more still to greet the final peace.

[28] I never burned for visions of my own
more than I do that he might see. To you
I offer all my prayers – praying my prayers

[31] are not too few – that you should free this man
from all the clouds of his mortality,
so highest happiness be shown to him.

[34] Our Queen, to you, who may do what you will,

I also pray you keep him (he has seen
so much!) healthy in all his heart intends.

[37] Watch, and defeat the impulses of man.

See! Beatrice with so many saints
closes her hands in prayers along with mine.'

[40] The eyes – which God both loves and venerates –
attentive to these orisons, made clear
how welcome to her were these holy prayers

[43] and then turned straight to the eternal light
in which (we're bound to think) no creature's eye
inwardly travels with such clarity.

[46] And drawing nearer, as I had to now,
the end of all desires, in my own self
I ended all the ardour of desire.

[49] Now Bernard, smiling, made a sign to me
that I look up. Already, though, I was,
by my own will, as he desired I be.

[52] My sight, becoming pure and wholly free,
entered still more, then more, along the ray
of that one light which, of itself, is true.

[55] Seeing, henceforward, was far more than speech –
yielding before the sight I saw – can show.
Mind's memory yields, outraged at that beyond.

[58] Like those who see so clearly while they dream
that marks of feeling, when their dreaming ends,
remain, though nothing more returns to mind,

[61] so I am now. For nearly all I saw
has gone, even if, still, within my heart,
there drops the sweetness that was born from that.

[64] So, too, in sunlight, snow will lose its seal.
So, too, the oracles the Sibyl wrote
on weightless leaves are lost upon the wind.

[67] You raise yourself so far, O highest light,
above our dying thoughts! Now lend once more
some little part of what it seemed you were,

[70] and make my tongue sufficient in its powers
that it may leave at least one telling spark

of all your glory to a future race.

[73] Returning somewhat to my memory,
re-echoing a little in my verse,
your triumph over all will be more known.

[76] As I believe, the sharp light I sustained
in that live ray was such that, if I'd turned
away, eyes blurring, I'd have lost my track.

[79] And therefore (I remember this) I grew
the braver as I bore that light, and joined
the look I had to that unending might.

[82] Grace, in all plenitude, you dared me set
my seeing eyes on that eternal light
so that all seeing there achieved its end.

[85] Within in its depths, this light, I saw, contained,
bound up and gathered in a single book,
the leaves that scatter through the universe –

[88] beings and accidents and modes of life,
as though blown all together in a way
that what I say is just a simple light.

[91] This knotting-up of universal form
I saw, I'm sure of that. For now I feel,
in saying this, a gift of greater joy.

[94] One single point in trauma is far more,
for me, than those millennia since sail
made Neptune marvel under Argos-shade.

[97] And so my mind, held high above itself,
looked on, intent and still, in wondering awe
and, lit by wonder, always flared anew.

[100] We all become, as that light strikes us, such
we cannot (this would be impossible)
consent to turn and seek some other face.

[103] For good – the only object of our will –
is gathered up entire in that one light.
Outside it, all is flawed that's perfect there.

[106] And now my spark of words will come more short –
even of what I still can call to mind –
than baby tongues still bathing in mum's milk.

[109] But not because that living light on which,
in wonder, I now fixed my eyes showed more
than always as before and one sole sight.

[112] Rather, as sight in me, yet looking on,
grew finer still, one single showing-forth
(me, changing mutely) laboured me more near.

[115] Within the being – lucid, bright and deep –
of that high brilliance, there appeared to me
three circling spheres, three-coloured, one in span.

[118] And one, it seemed, was mirrored by the next
twin rainbows, arc to arc. The third seemed fire,
and breathed to first and second equally.

[121] How short mere speaking falls, how faint against
my own idea. And this idea, compared
to what I saw ... well, 'little' hardly squares.

[124] Eternal light, you sojourn in yourself alone.
Alone, you know yourself. Known to yourself,
you, knowing, love and smile on your own being.

[127] An inter-circulation, thus conceived,
appears in you like mirrored brilliancy.
But when a while my eyes had looked this round,
[130] deep in itself, it seemed – as painted now,
in those same hues – to show our human form.
At which, my sight was set entirely there.

[133] As some geometer may fix his mind
to find a circle-area, yet lack,
in thought, the principle his thoughts require,

[136] likewise with me at this sight seen so new.
I willed myself to see what fit there was,
image to circle, and how this all in-where'd.

[139] But mine were wings that could not rise to that,
save that, with this, my mind, was stricken through
by sudden lightning bringing what it wished.

[142] All powers of high imagining here failed.
But now my will and my desire were turned,
as wheels that move in equilibrium,

[145] by love that moves the sun and other stars.

Commentaries and Notes

For each canto under Notes the reader will find broadly factual references and cross-references to texts cited by Dante that are worth reading alongside Dante's own. The asterisks in the text show the beginnings of the *terzine* in which such a reference occurs. Sometimes these point to a sequence of *terzine* in which, by consolidating these references, readers may discern some pattern of concerns – with, say, the minutiae of thirteenth-century politics – that will better emerge than in a strictly line-by-line treatment. This edition attempts to disturb as little as possible the narrative flow of Dante's poem. Where a more general pattern or point of critical interest has been pointed up, the explanatory note is subsumed into the interpretative Commentary which precedes the Notes and is marked by bold type. Traditional annotations in sequential form are to be found in the well-conceived apparatus by David Higgins in his commentary on C. H. Sissons' translation (London, 1980). The present editor is glad to acknowledge a warm debt of gratitude to Dr Higgins. Excellent Italian editions – which offer full discussion of disputed points of scholarly interest – include those by Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi (Milan, 2003) and Giuseppe Giacomone (Rome, 1975). Quotes from the Bible are from the Authorized Version.

CANTO 1

An invocation to Apollo. Although at the beginning of the canto Dante is still in the Earthly Paradise, he now begins to rise towards the heavens and Beatrice explains why.

COMMENTARY

The opening *terzina* of the *Paradiso* ([lines 1–3](#)) celebrates the divine order that displays itself in the created universe. The canto then proceeds to dramatize in two ways the question of how human beings are to participate in that divine order. From [line 4](#) to [line 36](#) Dante is concerned to establish how far, as a poet, his own mind and words can encompass the experience of divinity. Then, as the narrative ([37–99](#)) of the third *cantica* begins, the description of Dante's ascent from the Earthly Paradise graphically imagines the energies that are released when human beings are liberated from misleading conceptions of their own nature and approach the place in creation that was promised them. The canto concludes ([100–142](#)) with the first of Beatrice's philosophical lyrics, where she re-orientates Dante's thinking towards a new appreciation of what 'order' means, providing an outline (but no more than that) of the issues that the *Paradiso* at large sets out to explore.

The word '*gloria*' in [line 1](#) immediately distinguishes the *Paradiso*, in style and theme, from the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*. The two earlier *cantiche* had focused largely on the emotional and intellectual experiences of Dante himself, whether as traveller or poet. The *Paradiso* draws the reader's attention outwards to the contemplation of a wholly different realm of reality: glory is a word with a scriptural and liturgical history which carries (more in Italian than in English) associations of light and illumination; in Latin (with which the Italian is closely linked) '*gloria*' means a triumphal 'boast'. As if confronted with a stained-glass window, the reader is asked to contemplate a world which can boast of nothing save that it is penetrated by a light from beyond its confines. However, this light is not a direct revelation of God – the Christian God infinitely transcends His own creation, and Dante never presumes to offer a description or definition of God, even in the final moments of the *cantica*. (See introduction, pp. lviii–lxiv). 'Glory' is thus a

light expressing the creative power of God in the order of the created universe. On that understanding, the appropriate response to such light is not rapture or ecstasy but a very precise account of its operation. And this is what the first *terzina* offers, analysing how light is distributed within its universal frame, through emanation and reflection. Order is seen in the opening cantos of the *Paradiso* as a matter of quantity, which is to say, of more and less. This initial definition of order will be displaced later in the *cantica* by other conceptions of order which, as early as [canto 3](#), make it clear that, for Dante, order makes possible the diversity and variety of existence. None the less, the strong, simple conception of quantitative distribution offered here remains an indispensable foundation for these later developments.

How to participate in such an order? [Lines 4–6](#) affirm the possibility of participation, yet simultaneously admit that it is impossible to explain why the possibility arises. A complex emotional note is struck by the emphasis given to ‘*fu*’ *io*’/ ‘I was’ across the line ending (in the Italian text) [4 to 5](#). This is in part a triumphant affirmation of the privilege that Dante claims to have been granted in travelling to the highest heaven. Yet the Italian past remote ‘*fu*’ also indicates an event in the past which is distant, even irretrievable. No powers, at least of human mind, can recover it. Memory cannot contain every-thing that the intellect, in its vision, once possessed, and nor can human words.

The question that then arises is: what does Dante’s text purport to offer us if not a full account of beatitude? This crucial issue has already been discussed in the introduction. The extraordinary elevation of language, in terms of classical allusion, sustained syntax and subtlety of vernacular rhythm displayed here ([13–36](#)) presents a formal invocation which is more elaborate and more daring than anything in the *Inferno* or *Purgatorio*. Addressing himself to the Christian God, Dante does not hesitate to employ the language of classical mythology, defining his appeal here to the wisdom and intelligence of God through a detailed allusion to the sun god Apollo. Virgil, as a character, has disappeared from Dante’s poem but here, as throughout the *Paradiso*, the classical culture that Virgil (along with many others, most especially Ovid) represents continues to provide a source of rhetoric and elevated eloquence. (Compare *Inferno* 2: 65–7.) Among the many strands from which Dante weaves the linguistic texture of the *Paradiso* – including the Christian liturgy, astronomical science, political history and, at times, the language of the street – the myths and diction of classical texts

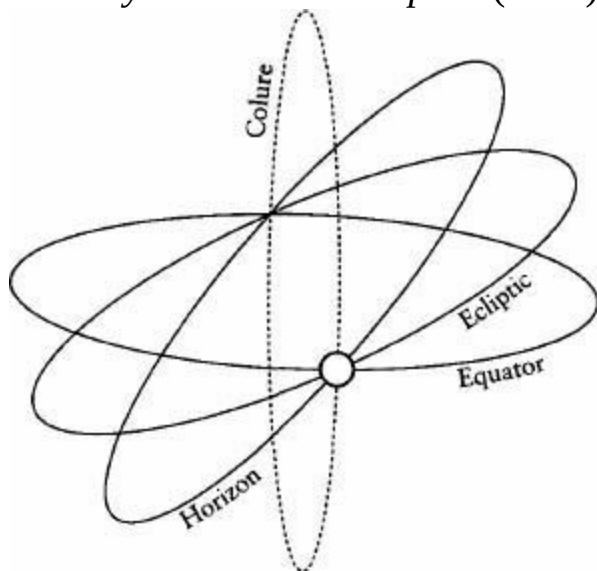
repeatedly make their contribution. Inexpressible as the totality of Dante's vision may be, his 'final' labour (13) still allows him to make confident, even flamboyant use of his classical learning.

In these lines, Dante makes a fine distinction. Mount Parnassus (16) has twin peaks. One of these, Helicon, is sacred to the Muses, whom Dante invoked in *Inferno* 2: 7 and *Purgatorio* 1: 8. The second, Cirra, is sacred to Apollo himself; and it is the ultimate power of wisdom and knowledge to which Dante now appeals at line 36. The labour, indeed self-abandonment, that is involved in receiving this inspiration is now evoked (19–21) through reference to the myth of Marsyas. (See Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 6: 382–400.) The satyr Marsyas challenges Apollo to a flute-playing contest, loses and is flayed alive for his presumption. This has regularly been regarded as an account of inspiration – the flayed skin of the artist wholly infused by the indwelling spirit of the god. At lines 28–33, referring to the triumphal laurel crowns that are bestowed on poets and conquerors alike, Dante makes learned and very elliptical references to the origins of the laurel: Daphne is the daughter of the river Peneus – hence 'peneian-branched' (32) – and loved by Apollo. Fleeing, Daphne is transformed into a laurel bush. (See Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1: 452–567.) Joy 'born anew' (33) is felt by Apollo whenever poets or conquerors show their devotion to his own love. The Italian lines 31–3 capture this cycle of flight, growth, rebirth and desire in a lyrical flow of alliterations and enjambments.

Now the reader's attention is turned (46–99) once more to the person of Dante and Beatrice, and in particular to a mystery which would defeat both the pagan and the scientific mind: how and why the human being can be assimilated into the perfect nature of the heavenly spheres and whether this assimilation includes the bodily form of the human person. (See introduction, p. xxix.) The poetry releases a rich vein of imagery, particularly of light, fire and heat, to picture how 'day and day were joined' (61–2) and how beyond the day we know is a day we do not know, which consummates rather than destroys our natural understanding. Myth and even Latinate phrases are employed here, but only to suggest the extent to which Dante's present vision transcends even the highest precedents. At *Metamorphoses* 13: 898–968 Ovid speaks of how the fisherman Glaucus (67–9) tasted a certain herb that had given new life to his fish and turned him into a sea god. Dante is similarly transformed, but the element he now enters is not water but boiling and scintillating fire. Lines 70–72 speak of the insufficiency of Latin phrases.

Dante here uses the Latin words ‘*per verba*’ – ‘through words’ – in his Italian text, but also attempts a neologism, ‘*trasumanar*’ I to ‘transhuman’, which carries suggestion of transubstantiation and transfiguration and implies not the transcendence of humanity but its transference from one dimension to another. The implication of this must be that the body indeed is carried over into a eternal world. (Compare *Paradiso* 14:43–5)

At line [37–42](#), as the narrative of Dante’s ascent begins, science replaces mythology. Propitiously, Dante rises from the Earthly Paradise to Paradise proper during the spring equinox period, though a little after the equinox itself, which was thought to be the time of Creation and of Christ’s conception. It has been calculated that this (fictional) ascent took place on Wednesday 13 April 1300. The ‘beacon of the world’ ([37](#)) is the sun which rises in the sky at a different point on each day of the year. These points are ‘*foci*’ – outlets or ‘estuaries’ – the most favourable of which is 21 March. This brings together four circles (or ‘spheres’) and three crosses in the sense that the four circles that are traced in the track of the heavens here intersect the horizon, each forming a cross with it. The four circles are the horizon, the equator, the ecliptic and the ‘colure’ (that is, the circle that passes the two poles of the heavens and crosses the ecliptic at Aries and Libra). Rising at this point, the sun is coupled with its best orbit, and the constellation Aries is the ‘best’ constellation. So at this point the sun has its best influence on the earth. (For this and other questions of astronomy, see P. Boyde, *Dante, Philomythes and Philosopher* (1981), PP.153–4)



The final phase of the canto ([100–142](#)) expounds in very clear and energetic terms the new logic that arises when the created order is seen as its

Creator intended it to be seen. It is, on this understanding, natural for human beings to rise as rapidly as Dante does. The ‘glory’ of which the opening line of the canto spoke establishes an order (comparable to that of a musical score) that assures us of a similarity of form – or formative character – between the created universe and its Creator ([103–5](#)), and invites intelligent beings such as humans and angels to participate in the enjoyment of that order. There is no suggestion here that order is a kind of restraint or chain of being. (Compare *Paradiso* 3.) On the contrary, the picture offered here by Beatrice is of a dynamic universe, driven by desire, in which each created object, whether intelligent or not, seeks to perform to the full the part that has been given to it. [Lines 127–32](#) realistically admit that the form is not always perfectly realized, due to imperfections or unresponsiveness. (Compare *Paradiso* 13: 49–78.) But where the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* emphasized these failings, the *Paradiso* is concerned (almost) exclusively with the freedom and diversity of experience that comes with an acceptance of Beatrice’s logic and its ‘novita’ or ‘newness’ ([82](#)).

NOTES

[37–45](#) This calculation concerns the hour of day: in Eden, where Dante now is (in the southern hemisphere, on the summit of Mount Purgatory), it is noon. In Jerusalem (in the northern hemisphere, at the antipodes of Eden) it is midnight.

[49–51](#) These lines contain an untranslatable pun on the words *pelegrin* or *peregrina*, which can mean both ‘peregrine falcon’ and ‘pilgrim’. (Compare *Purgatorio* 9:16.) Both meanings contribute to the picture of light reflected back to its source. Pilgrims desire to arrive at the goals they have set themselves; falcons dive, then return to the sky. So, too, a ray of light is reflected from a mirror at the angle of incidence, the exact angle at which it first strikes that surface.

[73–5](#) The soul is the last component to be created in the development of the human foetus. (See *Purgatorio* 25.) It is also ‘new’ (always a significant word for Dante) in that it has been created directly and uniquely by God. Saint Paul asks a question similar to Dante’s in 2 Corinthians 12: 2–4.

[76–8](#) The idea that the heavenly spheres produce harmonious music as they turn was proposed by Pythagoras and, though rejected by Aristotle, was accepted by Plato and Cicero (in his *Somnium Scipionis* (*De Re Publica*

6:17)). For more on Plato's cosmology, see *Paradiso* 4.
[97–9](#) Dante here uses the Latin term, drawn from Scholastic debate, expressing assent to an argument: 'I rested content.'
[109–11](#) Compare *Purgatorio* 17: 91–4. All things have a capacity for natural love or an impulsion towards the fulfilment of the existence they have been given.
[121–6](#) See introduction, p. xxx. The absolute quiet of the highest heaven, which is the Empyrean – where the presence of God is directly experienced – contains the *Primum Mobile*, which is the fastest moving of the heavenly spheres. Dante's final point of arrival will be the Empyrean. (See *Paradiso* 31.)

CANTO 2

Dante and Beatrice ascend to the Heaven of the Moon, where Beatrice explains why there are dark patches on the surface of the Moon.

COMMENTARY

Why are there dark spots on the surface of the moon? This question is discussed at length in this Canto ([49–111](#)). The intricacy of this discussion, not to mention its outdated science, exemplifies those aspects of the *Paradiso* which modern readers often find hard to tolerate. Samuel Beckett's Belacqua (in 'Dante and the Lobster', *More Kicks Than Pricks* (1934)), finds himself 'bogged down' in the passage, even though he is an enthusiastic reader of the *Commedia*, eager to get on to the famously delicate poetry of *Paradiso* 3. Others, particularly in the early twentieth century (under the influence of the great Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce), have recommended a distinction between the philosophical parts of the *Commedia* and its 'truly' poetic parts which would allow one to leap over any stumbling block that one encounters here. Dante himself seems to have anticipated some of these difficulties, for in the opening lines of the canto ([1–18](#)) he offers his reader the opportunity of deciding whether or not to continue with the third *cantica*.

Dante's address to his reader and the moon spot discussion itself have been considered above on pages xxvii–xxviii of the introduction – the contention there being that the reader should best approach [canto 2](#) (and, indeed, the

whole *Paradiso*) in a spirit of comedy. On that understanding, it scarcely matters whether the astronomical information offered in this canto is right or wrong. Far more important is the pleasure that arises from entering into the intellectual game that Dante invites his reader to play, involving (as good games do) a serious engagement of curiosity, intelligence and a capacity for thought experiment.

The importance that Dante attaches to intellectual pleasure can be illustrated by a simple comparison between the words that Dante attributes to Beatrice here and those that he gives to Virgil in the philosophical sequences of, for example, *Inferno* 11 or *Purgatorio* 17. In Virgil's discourses, Dante dramatizes the virtues of clarity and balance, of care in the choice of words and rigour in argument and syntax. Beatrice, too, displays these qualities, each *terzina* in her speech corresponding to a stage in her argument. But where in Virgil's speeches there is an academic neutrality of tone – a certain tight-lipped concentration on the structure of the lesson – Beatrice's words here and throughout the *Paradiso* reflect a delight in the processes of teaching and learning and a lyrical involvement in the implications of the lesson she is enunciating. At [lines 64–6](#) scholastic considerations of quantity, quality and kind are accompanied by an alliterative playfulness in the patternings of the phoneme /cw/. At [lines 82–96](#), the rhythms are those of an enthusiastic classroom teacher, wholly in control of her material, yet capable of treating her students with the sympathetic irony that their intelligence deserves. Having proceeded through a lively laboratory account of how light is reflected in equal intensity from any reflective surface, the demonstration concludes ([106–11](#)) with a beautiful evocation of the intellectual clarity that good teaching always aims to produce: the snows of confusion melt in the rays of the sun, and Dante is now ready to receive further and greater knowledge.

Like Beatrice, Dante's own narrative articulates an onward intellectual impulse in which the conclusions of [canto 1](#) are significantly modified. Where that canto offered a macroscopic account of the order of the heavens, [canto 2](#) focuses on the microscopic detail of moon spots. But trivial as this detail really is, its presence implies a new and more precise conception of divine order. The nub of Beatrice's discourse is to correct a view Dante first expressed in the *Convivio* 2: 13: 9, which holds that dark and light spots are a result of a merely quantitative distribution of more or less the same material on the moon. (See notes below.) But now he insists, through Beatrice's words

at [lines 70–72](#), that in fact this variation proceeds from the action of different formal principles, one producing white matter, the other producing black. So the emphasis falls upon difference, and the order of the universe, which in [canto 1](#) seemed mainly to be a matter of the quantitative distribution of light, here and throughout the rest of the *Paradiso* is shown to be one which makes diversity and variety possible. Even blackness has its place in the dapple of the whole – and is in no dualistic way to be dismissed as evidence of lack or negativity.

The words ‘different’ and ‘diverse’ occur repeatedly throughout [canto 2](#) (for instance at [lines 118](#) and [134](#)), but such words are at all points linked to the great issue lying beyond the moon spots game that is voiced in the concluding phase of the canto ([112–48](#)). Here – once more enlarging the focus and sweep of his considerations – Dante provides an explanation of the whole operation of the cosmic order as designed to produce variety of existence. The important word here – and perhaps the term most frequently used in the *Paradiso* – is *virtù*, meaning not simply moral virtue but the power or principle of growth. The intelligence of God is one and indivisible ([136–8](#)). But from the *Primum Mobile* downwards the universe is designed to radiate these powers and principles into all things, setting a seal upon them as an artist or craftsman might mark his products ([127–32](#)). The Fixed Stars of the Constellations in particular ([115–17](#)) produce, by their various astrological conjunctions, innumerable permutations ([138](#)) in the lower spheres.

The human being is the prime beneficiary of this universal scheme of individuation. (Compare *Paradiso* 13 and 22.) But at [lines 25–48](#), as Dante enters the Sphere of the Moon, he identifies a fundamental aspect of human existence which lies beyond, and even renders comic, the reach of rational inquiry and scientific experiment (much as Dante enjoys both activities). This is the intrinsic connection in the human being between body and soul. Now, as in *Paradiso* 1: 71–5, Dante confronts the mystery which allows him to enter, physically, a wholly spiritual realm as he fleetingly meditates on the ultimate Christian mystery which makes this possible – the union of divine and human natures in the person of Christ. (Compare *Paradiso* 7.) In Paradise, this mystery which on earth must remain an article of faith, will be understood more directly and unambiguously than (by implication) our understanding of why there are spots on the moon. Short of that, there can be no devaluation of human physicality. Indeed, [lines 31–6](#), describing the

inconceivable union (yet differentiation) of various kinds of physical being, display an exquisitely sensuous response to a variety of textures all experienced as one: cloud and diamond, water, solids, surfaces and penetrations.

It is similarly appropriate that [canto 2](#), beneath its concern with moon spots, should carry a particularly varied subtext of light imagery: the dapple of lunar shadows, the colour of pearl, (as in *Paradiso* 3: 13–15), the effects of reflection from mirrors, the trembling of light on snow or, perhaps most delicately, in the concluding lines [142–8](#), where the flowing of *virtù* through the universe is seen (microscopically) as the flowing of the light of happiness through the pupil of the eye.

NOTES

[7–9](#) Minerva is the goddess of wisdom, while Apollo (as in *Paradiso* 1: 13) is the god of the highest reaches of poetry. The ‘Ursa-stars’ are the constellation of Ursa Major and Ursa Minor (the latter containing the North Star, from which navigators take their direction). The ‘nine bright Muses’ are the goddesses of literature and art.

[16–18](#) The Argonauts, the mythic first navigators, seeking the golden fleece in Colchis, were astonished to see their leader Jason yoke two fire-breathing bulls to his plough and go scattering serpents’ teeth as seed. (See Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 7: 100–148.) See also for references to Jason, *Inferno* 18: 83–96 and *Paradiso* 33: 96.

[49–63](#) Folkloric explanations refer to Cain as the man in the moon – to which he had been banished for the murder of his brother Abel – carrying a bundle of thorns on his back (see Genesis 4). Against this the argument offered here enters an area of refined scholastic debate, pitting the true opinion offered by Saint Thomas Aquinas (c. 12.25–74) in *De Coelo* z: 16 against the view which Dante had supported in the *Convivio* drawn from the twelfth-century Muslim philosopher Avveroes’s *De Substantia orbis* 2.

[73–8](#) Throughout this passage, defining Dante’s mistaken view, darkness is seen to result from a *lack* of material, from the inability of the rarer patches to reflect light back.

[94–105](#) Aristotle sanctions experimental method in *Metaphysics* 1:1. The experiment with the three mirrors establishes that even though lights at different distances from the eye will appear different in size, the light that

comes from each of the three is equal in intensity.

[118–20](#) The philosophical term *telos* – to mean goal or defining purpose – is used here to reflect the technical rigour which Beatrice brings to her discussion of ends and aims.

CANTO 3

Dante encounters Piccarda Donati, who speaks of charity as the principle underlying the order of Heaven and tells how she was prevented from following her earthly vocation as a nun.

COMMENTARY

After the philosophical hymns delivered by Beatrice in the first two cantos, in [canto 3](#) Dante returns in some measure to a narrative mode familiar from the first two *cantiche*, focusing attention on the tragic life story of a particular historical figure. This is Piccarda Donati (c. 1270–99), the sister of Dante's close friend Forese Donati (d. 1296) who appears in *Purgatorio* 23 and 24. Piccarda's other brother, Corso Donati (d. 1308), is numbered among Dante's worst enemies, having played a considerable role in the events leading up to Dante's exile and, at *Purgatorio* [24: 82–7](#), is said to be heading direct to Hell. Here (as in *Paradiso* 8 and 9) Dante shows considerable interest in the way the same family on earth may produce very different consequences in eternity. Piccarda was also the cousin of Dante's wife, Gemma. But it was Corso who brought tragedy into his sister's life, as into Dante's own, and this may account for the interest that his poem shows in her. (Compare *Purgatorio* [24: 10–15](#)). Knowing from early childhood that she wished to become a nun, Piccarda joined the order of Poor Clares and entered a convent on the outskirts of Florence. But at some point between 1283 and 1288, Corso came to carry her away, so as to offer her in a political marriage to Rossellino della Tosa. The outline of Piccarda's earthly life is given at [lines 103–8](#). In [canto 3](#), as in [cantos 4](#) and [5](#), Dante is particularly interested in the moral psychology of her case: Piccarda accepted the marriage, though under duress and against her deepest intentions, but did she in any way contribute to her own fate? Should she be held responsible for breaking her vows?

Critics have rightly pointed to the parallels and contrasts between the case

of Piccarda and that of Francesca da Rimini in *Inferno* 5. But the voice that Dante gives to Piccarda is wholly free of the ambiguities and rhetorical claims on the audience's sympathy that appear in Francesca's case. Her account of her abduction is restrained but direct – particularly in registering the abrupt eruption of 'men' into her world [at line 106](#). Yet this voice is also fragile, admitting in its rhythms and diction – particularly (in Italian) by the placing of the word '*giovienetta*' (meaning 'young girl') in a pathetically exposed position at the end of a line ([103](#)) – to a need for security and a degree of uncertainty in her temperament.

It is in this latter respect that Piccarda's case is connected to the general theme of [canto 3](#). Remarkably, in imagining his first encounter with the blessed, Dante has chosen to speak of those whom some may not have chosen to place in Heaven at all – those whose natural character was inconstant. The Moon, with its connotations of shifting half light is, appropriately, the sphere to which Dante has now risen. So, too, while still within the shadow of the earth, the Heaven of Mercury will contain those tinged with ambition and the Heaven of Venus those whose temperaments were marked by strong sexual impulse. Yet pursuing the theme of order and diversity from previous cantos, Dante here imagines how, even with such lunar frailties, we can participate in the divine scheme.

The first indication of this occurs in the opening phase of the canto ([1–30](#)), where Dante depicts himself involved in a comedy of errors that deepens rather than prevents his further involvement in the understanding of beatitude. Having been corrected in the previous canto by Beatrice as to the real nature of the dark spots on the moon, Dante is ready, at [line 4](#), to recognize his mistake and the value of what he has been taught. Yet he never gets the chance to perform this pious act. Another opportunity for error now presents itself. Where his attention has been on the 'sun' of Beatrice's presence ([1](#)), it is now drawn – in a play of contrasting textures and temperatures – to the cool and flickering images of faces, reflected – or so Dante originally thinks – in the surface of the crystalline sphere in front of him. His error here is the opposite of that of Narcissus, who, on seeing himself reflected in a stream ([18](#)), innocently fell in love with that image, not realizing that it was himself, and drowned seeking to embrace it. But Dante's error is anything but fatal. Though the faces truly are in front of them, he assumes they are reflections from figures behind his back, and is gently derided by Beatrice's smile ([24](#)) when he turns round to see where they are.

Among the many implications of this very subtle passage there is plainly a reproof to the ‘narcissism’ of human thought, which supposes that it can identify the factual reality of the case by its own intellectual efforts. Yet entry into the divine order involves an abdication even of such innocent egotisms. The self, in the view that now begins to develop, is only truly assured of its own selfhood when seen face to face in relationship with others.

This is in essence the lesson that Piccarda now begins to teach. The famous verse that Dante attributes to Piccarda at [line 85](#) – ‘In His volition...’ – focuses on this point. Yet it should not be supposed that this line implies passive submission to divine order, or that the voice which Dante creates for Piccarda is merely and meekly submissive. On the contrary, the passage is concerned to exemplify the acceptance of divine order as an intelligent encounter with the intelligence of God, and as the expression of a freedom ensured and supported by its relationship with all other beings in Heaven. It is also concerned to place a love of God and the exercise of free choice in the direction of one’s life as the central and fundamental factor in human personality. (Compare commentary on *Purgatorio* 16.) Francesca had no conception of this. But Piccarda’s story demonstrates her recognition of these principles. Her need for the convent was an act of self-knowledge and self-determination. Violence and frailty on earth frustrated her intentions. But it is part of Dante’s characterization of her that he shows her in Heaven not only strengthened by the order she always sought, but also able to speak with utmost clarity of the centrality of free will and *caritas* – or charity – in the structure of a truly human life.

At [lines 64–6](#), Dante, still prone to error, is exercised by the worldly question – dictated by notions of hierarchy, understood in terms of power and superiority – of why Piccarda is content to remain on what seem to be the outer fringes of God’s pleasure. Part of the answer is to emphasize that the apparent hierarchy of Paradise represents an equitable distribution of favour, ensuring that the overarching will of God, on which all other relationships depend, is properly observed. (Other spirits will express a similar principle, notably the ambitious in *Paradiso* 6: [121–6](#).) Such an understanding, however, does not depend upon a merely mechanical distribution of more or less favour. It is, rather, that through understanding this point fully, and accepting it freely, the mind can engage with the working of the whole. Thus Dante attributes to Piccarda a clarity of intellect and even a skill in argument that denotes her active participation in the unfolding of truth. Piccarda, in

common with Beatrice, is far from being a feminine stereotype such as Francesca chooses to make herself. Dante here attributes to her strength of mind and phrase. This is reflected partly in her command of technical terms and argumentation ([77](#)), but above all in an elegance and controlled lightness of linguistic touch. Thus her phrases continually voice, repeat and vary the key word of her argument, ‘*voglia*’, meaning ‘will’ or ‘desire’. Between [lines 79](#) and [85](#), ‘*voglia*’ becomes the plural ‘*voglie*’, then the variant ‘*voler*’ and the neologism ‘*nvoglia*’ fin-wills’), finally issuing from this concentrated interplay in the triumphantly articulate four syllables of ‘*volontade*’. Dante here dramatizes a mentality in which a free act of will is also an act in which sheer pleasure, and even playfulness, have their contributions to make.

‘None partakes of God in the absolute sense but all partake of God absolutely in respect of themselves.’ These words of Saint Bonaventure (1221–74) (see *Paradiso* 12) have at times been used as an epigraph of the whole *Paradiso*, acknowledging that an infinite God cannot be subsumed into the understanding of any finite creature, even though the Christian God is believed to fill each creature to the utmost of its finite capacities. It is this understanding that Dante now, [at lines 88–90](#), claims to have been taught by Piccarda. Paradise is not truly a hierarchy at all. (See also *Paradiso* 4: [37–9](#), and introduction pp. liii–liv.) It is more akin to an orchestra or a musical score in which the smallest instrument or note of the shortest duration may add as much to the expressive texture of the whole as any louder or longer contributor. Just as the previous canto insisted upon divine order as the principle underlying material variety, so [canto 3](#), through Piccarda, offers a vision of moral diversity reconciled through a free acceptance of the whole with the community of the whole. (The analogy with musical composition is sanctioned by Dante in *Paradiso* 6: [124–6](#).)

NOTES

[16–18](#) Narcissus, as a punishment for rejecting the love of the nymph Echo, was compelled to fall in love with his own reflection in the stream. (See Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 3: 402–510.)

[85](#) This famous line may have its origins in Saint Augustine, *Confessions* 13: 9.

[97–9](#) A reference to Saint Clare of Assisi (1194–1253), who founded the order of Poor Clares in 1212 in association with Saint Francis.

[115–20](#) The Empress Constance (1152–98), daughter and heir of King Roger II, the Norman ruler of Naples and Sicily, married the Emperor Henry VI, bringing with her the kingdom of Sicily as dowry. Her son the Emperor Frederick II (see *Inferno* 10 and *Purgatorio* 3) thus inherited Sicily as well as the Holy Roman Empire. The Swabian storms are the three emperors of the Swabian dynasty, Frederick I ‘Barbarossa’ (1122–90), Henry VI (1165–97) and Frederick II (1194–1250).

CANTOS 4 and 5

Doubts left unanswered by Piccarda concerning the location of souls in Heaven and the keeping of vows are resolved by Beatrice.

COMMENTARY

[Cantos 4](#) and [5](#) deepen and extend the themes of [canto 3](#) in a tightly argued sequence, interspersed (as, for instance, at [4: 115–23](#) and [5: 1–12](#)) with ecstatic moments of intellectual celebration, associated with Beatrice, expressing the satisfactions that a mind in love may come to enjoy. The themes that continue here concern, firstly ([4: 22–63](#)), the hierarchy of Heaven and, secondly ([4: 64–117](#)), the question of how the taking and breaking of vows involves our freedom of will, which is the capacity that fundamentally defines us as human beings. [canto 5](#) develops these concerns and prepares for subsequent cantos where Dante discusses the grounds that are established for the participation of human beings in divine order, through the act of Christ’s Atonement and the institution of a Christian empire (*Paradiso* 6 and 7).

Two doubts are tugging at Dante’s intellectual appetite and threaten to paralyse him: do the souls really reside eternally in the heavens where he encounters them; and if we freely make a vow to God, is there any way in which that vow can be loosed or modified? Beatrice begins to address these doubts at [4:16](#). There is as yet no outburst of authoritative pronouncements, but a careful process of distinction intended, therapeutically, to lead the pupil into clearer understanding.

The first doubt is judged to be the more ‘poisonous’ ([4: 27](#)), in that it involves directly our conception of how the heavens are organized in

bringing human beings to the fullness of existence. It is essential to realize (see introduction, p. lv-lx) that human beings are ultimately fulfilled in the direct presence of God – in the Empyrean – and that what Dante sees in the first thirty cantos of the *Paradiso* is merely an analogical and metaphorical accommodation of his human mentality ([4: 37–48](#)). But Dante – always aware of the relation between his own Christian thought and that of classical antiquity – explicitly contrasts the Christian view with that expressed by Plato, which is that souls do indeed return to the stars that influenced their earthly lives. Dante, like Aquinas, believed in astrological influence. (See, especially, *Paradiso* 22: 112–17). But Plato’s view would deny that utter intimacy between the human creature and its Creator which, for Dante, is central to the Christian revelation.

Having re-established this Christian understanding, Beatrice now addresses ([4: 64–117](#)) the less ‘venomous’ danger of mistaking the nature of the vows made between a human being and God. A vow is seen as an act of free will and contrasted with violence (such as Piccarda suffers) where the will is forced to abandon its freely formed intentions. Beatrice first of all asserts the absolute sovereignty of human will, recognizing that it is possible, even when confronted with the utmost violence, for the will to remain steadfast. That is demonstrated both by Christian martyrs, such as Saint Lawrence (AD225–58), who – even when grilled alive – never wavered from his devotion to God, and classical heroes, such as Mucius Scaevola, who is supposed to have allowed his hand to be burned in a brazier to attest the courage and virtue of noble Romans. But, realistically, Dante admits that the will can frequently bend under external pressure and give partial consent to the act of violence in order to avoid worse dangers. This occurred in Piccarda’s case. And once that is understood, there is no discrepancy between her words and those of Beatrice ([109–14](#)).

Underlying the whole of this lucid and careful argument, there is a remarkable humanity and flexibility in Dante’s ethical thinking. Dante is aware of the great examples of endurance offered by the heroes and martyrs. Yet he does not demand that these examples should apply to lesser mortals or insist that human beings should test themselves beyond their capabilities. Indeed, at [5: 64–72](#), he pictures a sequence of pre-Christian examples of tragedies which have occurred precisely because vows have been taken too rapidly or with ill-considered ambition. Thus Christians are told, at [5: 73–8](#), that it is better not to make vows at all than not to keep them. This applies

directly to Piccarda. She is not the heroic type. Her personality – as displayed in her speeches – is delicately poised between self-knowledge and frailty. Yet this does not deny her a place in Paradise.

[Canto 4](#) opens with a peculiarly tragic sense that even the best intentions that human beings conceive can be as self-destructive as the conflicting appetites and passions that animals may suffer. But the ethical thinking of this canto displays a remarkable humanity and flexibility. Not only does Dante celebrate the flawed virtue of Piccarda but he also attempts to salvage as much as he can from Plato's mistaken conception of heavenly order ([4: 55–7](#)).

By the conclusion of the canto, at [4: 130–2](#), Dante is prepared to celebrate doubt itself as the primary impulsion in our search for truth. (See also introduction to *Inferno*, p. xlv.) At the same time, the confidence that accompanies Dante's doubt, derives from a belief – which Plato could not entertain – that the human mind is intimate with God and can rejoice in that intimacy. Poetically, it is this understanding which is expressed in the exuberant lyricism of [4: 114–23](#), where truth is not a matter of argument or proof but rather a matter of experience, inundating the mind and freeing the intellect from its self-imposed contradictions. But here, as throughout the *Paradiso*, argument itself is seen as a productive and humane resource, as much a part of the human being as its feelings.

A comparable mode of intellectual celebration emerges in [canto 5](#), even though here, as in [canto 4](#), Dante has to contemplate, simultaneously, the tragic consequences of human foolhardiness and the dignity of human freedom. His concern here is with the danger of taking vows too lightly. In ancient times, the great warriors Agamemnon and Jephthah ([5: 64–72](#)) were obliged, in pursuit of their apparently noble ends, to honour their ill-advised vows to the extent of sacrificing their own daughters to their respective gods. (See notes below.) In a Christian perspective, however, their actions misapprehend the nature of vows, of sacrifice and of the relationship between God and human beings. For Dante, a vow, far from being a piece of superstitious bargaining, is a supreme act of freedom. So it is here, at [5:19–63](#), that Beatrice develops the notion of free will (as Virgil said she would) first expounded by Virgil in *Purgatorio* 17 and 18. In the terms that Beatrice now employs, free will is far more than a capacity for self-motivation and self-control. It is, rather, the very ground of the highest relationship (as revealed in faith) that can be established between God as Creator and the

human creature.

In making a vow, God and the human being freely enter into a contract. Divine consent, in this particular instance is at one with human consent ([5: 27](#)), and this contract reflects the highest dignity that a human being can achieve. A sacrifice is involved in this ([5: 28–9](#)), and for that reason it should not be supposed that all people are capable of or need to commit themselves to vows. This, however, is a very different sacrifice from those made by Agamemnon and Jephthah. In the first place, the fact that a contract with God, once made, cannot subsequently be erased, reflects the absolute dignity of the mutual consent which underwrites it – whereas Agamemnon and Jephthah were both overwhelmed by consequences that were wholly unforeseen. In the second place, while the fact that an agreement has been established – the ‘*convenenza*’ ([5: 45](#)) – can never be cancelled, the exact terms in which the agreement is fulfilled may, under certain conditions decided by the Church or judicial authority, be subject to variation ([5: 46–66](#)). Dante’s terminology, and his citations of case law, are here technical and legalistic. But in spirit this concession is as humane as was his treatment in [canto 4](#) of Piccarda and Plato. Thirdly, however – and most important of all – a vow is not to be used as a bargaining tool or in pursuit of some ulterior motive, but purely as an exercise in the giving of gifts for their own sake. At [5: 19–24](#) Beatrice speaks (with an exhilaration of phrase that Virgil would never have displayed) of freedom as the greatest gift that God in the act of creation gave to his creatures. The fullest expression of divine freedom is to be seen in its ‘largesse’ or utter generosity. Conversely, human beings will, in their own terms, reflect that generosity most completely when they freely choose to bind their own freedom in contractual consent with the divine. There is an apparent paradox here. And so there was in Purgatory, where penitents were spoken of as being ‘free subjects’ to the terms of their penance. (See *Purgatorio* 16: 80.) Now, however, the paradox is expressed in terms that point exuberantly to the fulfilment of those free relationships that are realized through an enjoyment of the ‘gift’ of Heaven.

The concluding phase of [canto 5](#), which begins at [5: 88](#), marks the transition to the next heaven – that of Mercury – where Dante encounters those who, though in Heaven, were over-ambitious in their pursuit of honourable ends (*Paradiso* 6: 19–21). This ill-regulated desire is no impediment to the enjoyment of Paradise, any more than inconstancy was. Dante is even required to look at these spirits as if they were ‘gods’ ([5: 123](#)).

Argument now gives way to song and laughter ([5: 97](#)). The severe nuances of Beatrice's discourse – which has been directed at the Christian reader of the canto ([5: 73–84](#)) as well as at her pupil – now dissolve into a play of images, as the shadow forms of the ambitious dart towards Dante as if they were fish in a pond, impelled by eagerness and appetite. The canto ends with a similarly playful emphasis on the words for 'song' and 'singing': '*canto*' and '*canta*' ([5: 139](#)). The theological songs, however, of the next two cantos will develop in a way that will continue and expand the themes that have been announced in [cantos 4](#) and [5](#). The theme of contractual vows will, in [canto 6](#), be transformed into a consideration of the idea of justice, as exemplified in the Roman Empire, and then come to be related in [canto 7](#) to an exposition of the central doctrine of Christian belief, where, in speaking of the Atonement, Dante reveals the foundation on which the reconciliation of human beings and God was first established.

NOTES TO CANTO 4

[1–12](#) Dante pictures himself faced with a dilemma, in intellectual terms, comparable to that of 'Buridan's ass' who, in a famous medieval conundrum, would starve to death if faced with two equidistant and equally attractive bundles of hay, since it would have no way of deciding which bundle to go for.

[13–15](#) In the book of Daniel 2: 1–45, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, is angered by the inability of his court advisers to interpret his dreams, but is calmed by the divinely inspired words of the prophet Daniel.

[22–4](#) Plato in the *Timaeus* (which Dante knew through Saint Augustine's account in *The City of God* 13: 19) argues that souls pre-exist in the stars and return to these same stars at their death.

[29–30](#) The two Saint Johns referred to here are John the Baptist and John the Evangelist.

[46–8](#) The third archangel is Raphael, who helped to restore the sight of the old prophet Tobit (Tobit 11: 1–15).

[82–4](#) Saint Lawrence was a deacon of the Church in Rome. His fate in 258 AD was to be roasted alive. Mucius Scaevola attempted, but failed, to kill the Etruscan Lars Porsenna and was going to be executed at the stake, but his courage in holding his own hand into the flame earned a reprieve for him – and for Rome, too. (See Livy, *History of Rome* 2: 12; see also also *De*

Monarchia 2: 5: 14-)

[97–9](#) The Empress Constance was forced from her convent by the bishop of Palermo, so as to marry and produce an heir (which she did – Emperor Frederick II).

[103–5](#) Alcmaeon was persuaded to murder his mother by his dying father, who had been persuaded to enter the Trojan war on the treacherous advice of his wife. (See Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 9: 408 and *Aeneid* 6: 445–6; also *Purgatorio* 12: 49–51.)

NOTES TO CANTO 5

[49–51](#) In Leviticus 27, rules are set down which govern the ways in which the contract between God and the chosen people can be modified.

[64–72](#) The story of the judge Jephthah is told in Judges 11: 29–40. Jephthah promises he will sacrifice to Jehovah the first person he meets at a feast to celebrate his victory over the Ammonites. This person proves to be his daughter. Agamemnon, the ‘chieftain of the Greeks’, sought to placate Diana for a sacrilegious act by sacrificing his daughter Iphigenia. (See Virgil, *Aeneid* 2: 116; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 13: 14–38 and Cicero, *De Officiis* 3: 25: 95.)

CANTO 6

The Sphere of Mercury. The ambitious. The Emperor Justinian tells the story of the providential mission of the Empire from Roman times to Dante’s own day.

COMMENTARY

[Canto 6](#) celebrates what, in Dante’s view, was the God-given mission of the Roman Empire: to bring justice and peace to the whole of humanity throughout the world. The canto thus embodies some of the most central concerns of Dante’s political thinking as expressed in *De Monarchia* (see introduction to *Inferno*, pp. xxxiv–xxxvi), which was probably written around the same time as the early cantos of the *Paradiso*. His arguments in *De Monarchia* are idiosyncratic, even, in the views of some, heretical. So, too, in the *Paradiso* there are some distinctly odd and sometimes uncomfortable

emphases, particularly concerning the relation of Church and State, where Dante's concern with justice in the temporal world would seem to divert attention from the operations of divine love.

These questions are not necessarily resolved in [canto 6](#) itself. It is important to see this canto as part of a continuing discussion of justice in the *Paradiso* which will not conclude until [canto 18](#) (if then). More immediately, the canto runs in conjunction with [canto 7](#), where the foundation of all human justice is seen to lie in the satisfaction or 'vengeance' of God as expressed in the crucifixion of Christ. Similarly the canto grows out of the discussion of vows in the two preceding cantos: it is concerned with the ways in which pacts and agreements (consciously chosen and willed) can be established between heroic human beings. The justice and heroism which support the Empire are, for Dante, the very foundation of peace in the world.

It is significant that [canto 6](#) concludes with a reference to the story of a man who, like Dante himself, was unjustly exiled for his devotion to political justice ([127–42](#)). This is Romeo di Villanova (c. 1170 – 1250) (see notes below). In drawing attention to this otherwise obscure historical figure, Dante is clearly attempting to display towards him (and to claim for himself) the justice that Romeo was denied in his earthly existence. Justice, finally, is not simply a matter of social organization or of legal process. It is, equally, an ethical order which ought to make possible, as in the Heaven of Mercury, a proper recognition of the merits of individuals – to know and honour the hidden 'heart' ([140](#)).

The speaker throughout [canto 6](#) is the Emperor Justinian (c. 482 – 565), who ruled the Empire between AD 527 and 565 from Constantinople, formerly Byzantium, to which the Emperor Constantine had removed the seat of Imperial power in AD 324 ([1–3](#)). In military terms Justinian's empire was largely successful, mainly through the military prowess of his nephew, the general Belisarius (490–565), who waged war in Asia, Africa and in the Italian peninsula against the invading Ostrogoths ([25–6](#)). Belisarius's efforts gave Justinian the leisure and confidence ([27](#)) to pursue his major work, which was the codification and clarification of Roman law – an achievement that was to provide a foundation for legal practice throughout the Middle Ages.

An important connection is made between [canto 6](#) and [canto 7](#) when at [lines 13–15](#) Dante notes that Justinian's jurisprudential interest depended on a true understanding of Christ's nature as being both divine and human. In

[canto 7](#) this doctrine will be proposed as the foundation stone of human redemption and the way by which human nature can be restored to the dignity it relinquished at the Fall. It is only when Justinian abandons heresy and comes to recognize that Christ is as much a human as a divine being that he can set out with confidence on the work of legal codification. The orthodox teaching made clear to him the potential value of human existence. Justice is a means of safeguarding and of expressing that value. Properly codified, laws provide a rational and reliable basis for the conduct of our temporal lives.

The account of the Empire that Dante attributes to Justinian extends from its origins in Troy (geographically close to the New Rome of Constantinople: [lines 5–6](#)) on to the time of the medieval Empire and the confusions that afflict Dante's own political world as the Empire declines in authority. Displaying a remarkably detailed knowledge of world history (see notes below), Dante traces four main phases in the development of Rome, emphasizing its divine sanction, its providential diffusion and its uninterrupted lineage. At [lines 34–54](#), he is concerned with the centuries in which Rome established its position in Italy and defended itself against Hannibal's Carthaginians. Attention then falls, in [lines 55–81](#), on the Roman civil wars and the eventual institution of the Empire under Augustus. [Lines 82–93](#) speak of the providential dispensation that allowed Christ to be crucified under Roman jurisdiction and the subsequent vengeance that was taken on the Jews by the Empire in the sacking of Jerusalem in AD70 (a highly problematic contention, which none the less forms a link with [canto 7](#), [lines 19–21](#)). In [lines 94–111](#) Dante speaks of the medieval successor of Rome, the Holy Roman Empire, identifying its prestige under Charlemagne and its decline into the civil strife wrought by Guelfs and Ghibellines in Italy when Imperial power came to be replaced by the disruptive ambitions of the French Angevin dynasty – of which much more is said in [cantos 8](#) and [9](#).

The guiding metaphor of the canto is that of the flight from place to place of the Imperial Eagle. But it is important to note that at every point Dante refers to the Eagle as a '*segno*' – a 'sign'. The Eagle is important, not as a dramatic metaphor evoking power and victory, but as an emblem which offers a clear point of reference in the turmoil of the troubled history to which Dante refers. Thematically, this is consistent with Justinian's concern with the codification of the law. Law needs to be communicated in clear and comprehensible signs if it is to harmonize with justice rather than with oppression. And powerful, even necessary, though military action may be (as

in the hands of Belisarius), clarity of understanding, incorporated in the sign, is superior. We should expect such a position to be adopted by Dante. As a poet he is naturally concerned with the proper regulation of poetic signs, but he is also particularly concerned with the ways in which his own text can display the justice of God. It is in this spirit that [canto 6](#) demands to be read. This is not a canto of sweeping imaginative effects (though some translations try to make it so). It is formal, almost ritualistic in its repetitions and elliptical references to huge events. Perhaps the best comparison is to the great mosaic representations of Justinian and his court in iconic form that are to be seen (as Dante would have seen them) in Ravenna, the city from which the Byzantine Empire ruled its Italian province.

NOTES

[1–6](#) Aeneas, the Trojan progenitor of Rome, is here identified as the husband of Lavinia (his Italian second wife). He followed the sun from east to west from Troy to Rome. Constantine, whose actions Dante often deplors (as in *Inferno* 19 and 27), reversed this trajectory.

[13–18](#) Dante may be reinventing history at this point to emphasize the importance of a proper understanding of Christ's nature to the initiation of Justinian's enterprise. Justinian's codification of the law took place between 528 and 533; Agapetus was pope between 535 and 536.

[34–54](#) Fighting in the region around Rome, Aeneas was assisted by the native Italian Pallas (whose sister Lavinia he married). Pallas died in battle against Turnus and the Rutuli. (See Virgil, *Aeneid* 10: 479–89.) Alba Longa was founded by Aeneas' son Ascanius prior to the settlement of Rome and was defended by the three Curiatii, champions of Alba Longa, who were defeated by the three Horatii, and the Eagle's power transferred to Rome (Virgil, *Aeneid* 1: 272.). The rape of the Sabine women, in the time of Romulus, brought wives to the earliest Romans. Lucretia, during the time of the seven kings of Rome, was raped by the son of Tarquinius Superbus, an event which led to the overthrow of monarchical rule and the establishment of the republic in 510 BC.

The 'Brenner Gaul' is Brennus, leader of the Gauls in the fourth century BC; Pyrrhus was the third-century BC king of Epirus. A list of exemplary ancient Romans follows. Torquatus condemned his own son to death; Quinzio, nicknamed Cinninatus because of his 'unkempt' hair, was called

to leave his austere life as a ploughman and become dictator. The Decii and Fabii died fighting for Rome. The Arabs are the North African Carthaginians who contested supremacy of the Mediterranean with Rome in the Punic Wars until Hannibal (247-C.183 BC) was defeated by Scipio Africanus the Elder (235–183 BC) at the battle of Zama in 202 BC. (Scipio had first fought the Carthaginians at the age of nineteen at the battle of Cannae in 216 BC.) Pompey the Great (106–48 BC) fought successful campaigns in Sicily, Spain and Africa, but was defeated in the civil wars by Julius Caesar (100–44 BC). The hill referred to as ‘that great hill’ is Fiesole, thought to be peopled by Catiline conspirators against the true authority of Rome. (For Dante’s continually aggressive attitude to Fiesole, see *Inferno* 15: 73–96 and *Paradiso* 15.)

[55–93](#) The world was brought back to peace and justice (says Dante here and in [canto 7](#)) in preparation for the coming of Christ. But near that time, Julius Caesar first conducted his successful campaigns in Gaul, from the river Var to the Rhine, carrying his successes into the regions designated by all the tributaries of the Rhone and the rivers Isere, Loire and Seine. Caesar precipitated the civil wars by crossing the river Rubicon between Ravenna and Rimini in 49 BC, neglecting orders from the Senate. Caesar besieged Pompey at Durazzo (or Dyrrachium) in Illyria (on the western coast of the Balkan peninsula) and defeated him at Pharsalia in northern Greece in 48 BC. Atandros, close to the river Simois, was the port from which Aeneas set sail, near Troy where Hector’s body was buried outside the walls. Caesar took Egypt from the Ptolemys and gave it to Cleopatra (69–30 BC) as queen. Juba, king of the Numidians, was an ally of Pompey. The ‘western realms’ ([line 71](#)) are Spain, where followers of Pompey (led by his sons) were finally defeated at the battle of Munda on 17 March 45 BC. The following ‘stewardship’ is that of Octavius Augustus (63 BC–AD 14), who defeated Brutus and Cassius (see *Inferno* 34), Mark Antony at Modena and Mark Antony’s brother Lucius at Perugia. After the final defeat of Mark Antony, Cleopatra, who had become his lover, killed herself with an asp bite. When Augustus’s victories were complete, the doors of the temple of Janus were closed as a sign of universal peace. The third Caesar was Tiberius (emperor AD 14–37) within whose reign Christ was crucified (AD 34). Under the Emperor Titus (Vespasian), who reigned between AD 70 and 79, ‘vengeance’ was taken on the Jews for the crucifixion of Christ with the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. (See

Paradiso 7.)

[94–111](#) The threat to Christendom offered by the Lombard invasions of Italy was ended by the victories of Charlemagne (742–814), whose aid was requested by Pope Hadrian I (d. 795) in 773, and who was crowned emperor on Christmas Day 800. But since Charlemagne's time, the Empire had been affected by rebellion and partisan strife. One group (the Guelfs – often in alliance with the 'tinsel lilies', which are the emblem of France) directly oppose the Empire, while the Ghibellines claim to own the Imperial sign themselves. Charles Anjou (1254–1309), who arrived in Italy in 1300 (and seems to have been implicated in Dante's exile), became the most powerful supporter of the Guelfs (along with the Church) against Imperial rule. Charles is warned that he cannot assume that the 'lily flowers' of his coat-of-arms can replace the Imperial Eagle.

[127–42](#) Romieu de Villeneuve (1170–1250) rose from humble origins to become the seneschal of Count Raymond Berengar IV of Provence (fl. 1209–45). He arranged the marriage of Raymond's four daughters to four kings. Unjustly accused of embezzlement, Romieu was dismissed and died in poverty.

CANTO 7

*Beatrice speaks of the role of Imperial justice in
avenging the death of Christ and offers an account of
Christ's death as a just atonement for sin.*

COMMENTARY

By reputation, [canto 7](#) is the most dauntingly doctrinal canto in the whole of the third *cantica*. Any such judgement tends to overlook the features of the canto which give to it its narrative and poetic character – in particular the fact that, after [canto 6](#), which is dominated by the voice of a public man discussing war and politics, [canto 7](#) returns to the lyrical, yet philosophical voice of Beatrice. Yet the canto is Dante's most explicit and extended account of the central doctrines of Christian belief and undoubtedly drew from him some of his most vigorously argumentative poetry.

At its heart stands the doctrine of the Atonement, which (with some differences of emphasis) Dante drew from the highly influential treatise of

Saint Anselm (see notes to *Paradiso* 12, below), *Cur Deus Homo?* (*Why God-man?*) How, after the fall of Adam, can human nature ever again be at one with God? Some reparation or satisfaction is required. But it is not logical to suppose that a finite creature can ever compensate for an offence done to an infinite Creator, except that in Christ human nature is miraculously made one with the divine, and so His self-sacrifice on the Cross is a just and fitting response. As Anselm puts it:

No one save God can make it [reparation]. No one save man ought to make it. It is necessary for a God-man to make it.

Cur Deus Homo? [Chapter 6](#)

Having devoted the whole of [canto 6](#) to the celebration of providential justice, Dante now fittingly pursues Anselm's quasi-legal interest in the question of how compensation can be made to God. The word 'satisfaction' is constantly repeated (as for instance at [lines 93, 98 and 102](#)), and the structure of the argument that Dante attributes to Beatrice is largely similar to Anselm's. [At lines 25–33](#) Beatrice speaks of Adam's disobedience as a sin that involves the whole of subsequent humanity in that original sin, until the Logos or 'Word of God' (which is Christ) chose, in an act of love, to unite itself totally with human nature. But why did God choose this way, of the many that He might have chosen, to redeem humanity?

The emphasis in [lines 55–120](#) then begins to fall as much upon notions of God's freedom and generosity (in Italian, '*bontà*') as upon His justice. The original act of creation was an act of pure freedom and generosity on God's part. (See [lines 64–6](#); compare *Paradiso* 29 and introduction, pp. xlvi–xlvii.) In *Paradiso* 5: 19–2.4 Dante has already emphasized that God's intention in creating Adam was to endow humanity with its own freedom to participate (or not) in divine life. So, along with the question of how reparation can be made, goes the question of how that human freedom which has been lost in the Fall can be restored. Had God simply offered an amnesty, this would not have recognized the potential dignity of the human creature. Yet human beings no longer possess either the freedom or the resources to restore themselves to their former state ([91–102](#)).

At no point in the *Paradiso* is it possible to detach any particular piece of doctrine from its narrative and imaginative context. Dante's emphasis on the goodness and joy of the divine act is consistent with the fact that Beatrice is the speaker, as Christopher Ryan has emphasized ('*Paradiso* VII: Dante and Anselm', in *Dante and the Middle Ages*, ed. John Barnes and Cormac Ó

Cuilleanain (Dublin, 1994)). But in one (now deeply regrettable) respect, the passage dealt with below – which serves to connect the themes of [canto 6](#) with those of [canto 7](#) – while reflecting Dante’s rigorous concern with justice, also produces an unmistakably anti-semitic argument. [At line 19](#) and at [lines 40–51](#), it becomes clear that the whole discussion of the Atonement is stimulated by a question that first arose in *Paradiso* 6: 92–3 as to why Christ’s death – which was an act of justice in so far as it punished human nature – should have been avenged justly by the Roman attack on Jerusalem in AD70, which led to the massacre of the Jews and the destruction of the temple. The argument at [lines 46–7](#) is that, insofar as Christ was divine as well as human, his death on the Cross was as unjust as, from the human point of view, it was just. In canto 6, as in *De Monarchia*, Dante goes to extreme lengths in his devotion to the idea of Roman justice to treat Christ’s death under Roman jurisdiction as not only retribution for the sins of Adam but an indication of Rome’s mission to bring providential justice to the world. A passion for symmetry, if not outright anti-semitism, leads Dante to his vindictive approval of the Roman assault on Jerusalem which resonates in the history of relationships between Christians and Jews.

While this now-distressing argument cannot be overlooked, the outer brackets of the canto – [lines 1–19](#) and [lines 123–8](#) – also introduce qualifications to Dante’s treatment of the Atonement. The final section of the canto makes clear that the Crucifixion of Christ is not to be viewed, once and for all, as a conclusion but rather as the removal of an impediment to the full expression of God’s initial act of creation. This act will fully and finally be expressed in the resurrection of the human body. All things in the physical world are subject to decay, and will eventually disappear. The human being is also physical in its nature. But since the soul which animates the body is created directly by God, and since the human soul is inextricably related to the individual body, that body, unique in creation, is assured of eternal resurrection, once the path between God and humanity has been repaired. (See also *Paradiso* 14: 43–60, *Purgatorio* 25 and introduction to *Inferno*, pp. lii–lv.)

For Dante Beatrice is a constant indication of the truths of the Resurrection. And insofar as she is in some measure the symbol of the true Church that bears that Gospel she speaks ‘unerringly’ ([19](#)) about the good news implicit in this act of vengeance. But the opening of the canto draws attention to the scope and character of words (as elsewhere Dante does in his

use of the ‘inexpressibility’ *topos*: see introduction, pp. lviii–lx) and disallows any easy assumption that words simply mean what they say. The opening lines of the canto show Dante at the height of his linguistic powers, drawing confidently on both Latin and (inaccurate) Hebrew to construct a hymn of triumph. This is the last manifestation of the souls of the ambitious in Mercury.

But then (10–15) the text turns emphatically to the vernacular voice which, from the *Vita nuova* onwards, has been associated by Dante with the experience of love. The author abandons his opening pretensions and shows himself, as a character, in a state of comic confusion, as he was when he met Beatrice in the Earthly Paradise. (See *Purgatorio* 30.) The language momentarily dissolves into the two syllables that compose Beatrice’s name (14), and, in doing so, registers the vernacular form by which she was probably known in Florence, ‘Bice’ Portinari. In the *Vita nuova*, Dante suppressed this colloquial form entirely in favour of ‘Beatrice’, a word which is rich in religious and symbolic associations (though he was reluctant to employ even this elevated form of his *donna*’s name). Now, ‘Bice’s’ name coming emphatically into prominence acts as a reminder that (as at many crucial moments of the *Commedia*) justice, reason and the epic discourses of the classical world will eventually yield to an understanding that is born of love and focused upon the redemption and celebration of human creatures in their most familiar and earthly aspect. The language in which Dante expresses this understanding is, then, the language of the lyric, even in a canto as firmly devoted to doctrine as [canto 7](#). Throughout, a lyrical cultivation of phonetic patterning, of alliteration and repetition (see, in particular, [lines 19–21](#), [34–42](#) and [64–72](#)) is present in even the most rigorous passages of argumentation. This does not outweigh the grievous implications of Dante’s attitude to the Jews. It does, however, suggest that Christian utterances are, for Dante, to be understood less as points in a philosophical programme than as songs of pleasure.

NOTES

- [1–3](#) Dante here combines Latin and (rather suspect) Hebrew to produce his own version of a solemn acclamation of praise to the god of battles: ‘Hosanna, holy God of hosts, who illuminates supremely with your brightness the happy fires of this realm.’ (Contrast the invented languages

of *Paradiso* 15: 28–30, *Inferno* 7: 1 and *Inferno* 31: 67. Compare also the re-writing of the Lord's Prayer that opens *Purgatorio* 11.)

[67–9](#) and [124–44](#) These arguments depend upon a distinction, which is explored further in [canto 13](#), between the two ways in which creatures are brought into existence. They can be 'created' directly by God ('*sanza mezzo*'/'without intermediary') or 'generated' by God working through the agency of Nature. The angels, the heavenly spheres and the human soul are created directly by God. Physical things are created by the physical, chemical and biological laws of nature. The human being, as body and soul, is unique in being brought into existence by both direct and indirect action. All generated things are subject to decay – save for the human body which is associated with the 'created' soul.

[133–8](#) For the distribution of *virtù* or creative power in the universe, see commentary on *Paradiso* 2. This power works – in its many different ways – on primal, undifferentiated matter, which has the potentiality to assume any particular nature.

CANTO 8

Rising to the Heaven of Venus, Dante encounters spirits whose earthly lives have been characterized by sexual passion. Carlo Martello discusses providence and heredity.

COMMENTARY

The third heaven that Dante and Beatrice reach – and the last that lies within the shadow cast by the earth – is the Heaven of Venus. Here, in [cantos 8](#) and [9](#), Dante encounters three figures – all of them associated with the courts and amorous culture of Dante's own time – whose earthly lives were characterized by an excessive but not destructive devotion to sexual love.

[canto 8](#) is dominated by the figure of Carlo Martello (1271–95), who was heir to the Angevin kingdom of Naples and king of Hungary. He visited Florence in 1294, a year before his early death, and Dante seems to have been involved in the chivalric celebrations of the occasion. In [canto 9](#) Dante depicts Cunizza (c. 1198–c. 1279), the four-times married mistress of the troubadour poet Sordello (c. 1200–c. 1269) (who has an important role in *Purgatorio* 6 to 8),

and the troubadour poet Folco of Marseilles (d. 1231), who in his later years became a crusading bishop.

[Cantos 8](#) and [9](#) are concerned with the ways in which love – including friendship and marriage – can provide an understanding of the providential ordering of the world by divine love ([97–135](#)), and conversely with a vision of the political confusion and violence that beset twelfth- and thirteenth-century Europe. There is a connection between these two cantos and the two that precede them. Justice and the redemptive power of divine love produce an order which then needs to be translated (against all the confusion of the modern political world) into the relationships that exist between particular persons in particular circumstances. Courtliness, at its best, may be seen as the virtue that underlies and celebrates such relationships.

In pursuing this logic, however, Dante produces a very different kind of poetry from the epic and doctrinal verses of [cantos 6](#) and [7](#). [Cantos 8](#) and [9](#) display a wide variety of linguistic and rhetorical features, ranging from intimacy of tone to philosophical lyric to invective and satire (often based on geographical motifs evoking the troubled homelands of the protagonists). For Dante, a connection exists between the art of rhetoric and the Heaven of Venus. In the *Convivio* 2: 13 and 14, he asserts that the planet Venus is clear and sweet in its appearance, as is rhetoric, too, and that just as Venus appears as both the morning and the evening star, so rhetoric can offer both lucid and darker or more hidden meanings. Significantly, the poem which in the *Convivio* introduces these rather artificial allegorical considerations is quoted directly at [line 37](#), and may have been sung at the celebrations to mark Carlo Martello's visit to Florence. But Dante's conception of rhetoric has clearly developed since the time of the *Convivio* to embrace a far greater spectrum of linguistic possibilities. (On Dante's philosophy of language, see introduction to *Inferno*, pp. lxxxix–xc.)

[Canto 8](#) begins with a particularly ornate reference to the myths of Venus, and with rhythms and sonorities that evoke a certain languor, or even sensuous indulgence. [Lines 1–9](#) provide a concise history of the pagan cult of Venus – brought ashore in Cyprus, hence the 'Cyprian' – which extended to her mother Dione and her son Cupid (whom Virgil describes at *Aeneid* 1: 685–8 as lying, disguised as Aeneas's son, in the lap of Dido and thus preparing her for her tragic affair with Aeneas). At the same time, in the course of this long, periodic sentence, Dante is able to interleave scientific astronomy into these mythic allusions, referring to the epicycle – the loop, or

subsidiary orbit, around a point on its major orbit – through which the planet Venus was thought to move. (See *Convivio* 2: 4.) There is a point here which allows Dante to make use of mythological references, while at the same time asserting that these are no more than ornaments to an understanding which derives its clarity or truth from science and Christian revelation. This is repeated at [line 69](#), where Dante alludes to the myth that the volcano Etna was fired by the breath of the giant Typhoeus, only to dismiss this explanation in favour of a more realistic account relying on a knowledge of sulphur clouds. Here, as elsewhere (see especially *Paradiso* 17: 31–6), Dante’s new rhetoric, though availing itself of the resources of classical culture, displays an awareness of truths available only to the mind of the modern Christian thinker.

The extent to which the mind is nurtured by exact observation of natural phenomena appears in the simile that occurs at [lines 22–30](#), where Dante compares the movement of the souls in this circle to the movement of winds which erupt from clouds compressed by cold air. (In Dante’s science, lightning or meteors are ‘seen’ winds.) The same passage also introduces an interest, which Dante carries into [canto 9](#), in the relation between the order of nature and the order of the angels. (Compare *Paradiso* 9: 61.) Beyond the nine physical heavens, and related to each of these heavens, are the nine angelic orders which – since their primary function is to contemplate God – also serve as agents of divine providence who move the planetary heavens through the power of intelligence. (Compare *Paradiso* 2.8; for angels, see introduction, pp. xlv–xlvii.) The spirits who appear in Venus not only occupy a position in the physical hierarchy of the planetary spheres but are also said to be connected, in an ascending spiral, to the Seraphim who, specifically in the highest heaven, contemplate God and God’s providence in an act of pure love. A particular relationship exists between the third heaven and the angelic order of principalities ([34–6](#)), appropriately enough, considering that this episode is concerned with *princely* rule and misrule. It is to similar (though not identical) angelic spirits that Dante appeals in the poem from the *Convivio* quoted at line 37: ‘*Voi che ‘ntendendo...*’ Even at that early stage in his career, when he was much concerned to examine, in a philosophical and scientific spirit, the foundations of the created universe, Dante still evoked the Christian notion of a universe sustained by divine love and illuminated by angelic presences. This understanding is now carried to its conclusion in the meeting with Carlo Martello, through the discussion of providence at [lines](#)

[97–111](#). The emphasis here falls upon an inter-relation between Dante and the souls he encounters which depends upon all their thoughts being connected with, and contained within, the full perspective of the providential design ([85–7](#)).

From [line 45](#) onwards, the canto is given over to the princely Carlo Martello, who finally discusses the theology of providence, but first considers the ruin wrought in Europe by the advance of the French Angevin dynasty. The prevailing mood of the canto is set by the conditional tenses of [lines 50](#): *if* Carlo had lived to assume his inherited role among the princes of Europe, many ills ‘*would... have been*’ avoided which will prove detrimental to peace and stability. Yet these conditionals do not imply regret. They express, realistically, an understanding of the ways in which the misuse of human freedom can distort the workings of both providence and the natural order. They also reveal an awareness that providence provides an order superior to any that contemporary politics could have produced. Meanwhile, the friendship and love that can exist between particular persons is both a bulwark against disorder and an anticipation of the ultimate order of love. There may be an element of sycophancy in Dante’s claim on the attention of the princely Carlo. There is also a political and theological significance of profound importance to his developing thought.

Carlo’s speech moves through three phases. The first ([58–84](#)) views the territories that Carlo, by natural inheritance, would have ruled had he lived to do so. His illuminating presence is celebrated in a reference at [line 64](#) to the gleaming ‘crown’ of Hungary which he had already inherited through his mother in 1292. But this sovereignty would have extended to Sicily had it not been for the ‘misrule’ ([73](#)) that led to the 1282 revolt known as the Sicilian Vespers, the loss of Sicily by the Angevins to the Aragonese and, subsequently, to the disruption of Italian politics caused by Angevin attempts to reassert their one-time position in the southern provinces. In Italy the presence of Angevin armies exacerbated the strife between Guelfs and Ghibellines, and Charles II of Anjou is regularly attacked by Dante for the part he played in Dante’s exile. (See introduction to *Inferno*, pp. xvi–xxi.) This speech is syntactically sustained and studded with rhetorical devices (as, for instance, when Sicily is ornamentally referred to as Trinacria’ ([67](#))), but it ends with a violent report, registered in colloquial Sicilian, of the cry uttered by the citizens of Palermo as they rose against their French overlords. There follows a recognition that lineage is no guarantee of moral rectitude, as Carlo

attacks his younger brother Robert of Anjou (1275–1343), who was declared king of Naples in 1297 with the connivance of Dante's great enemy Pope Boniface VIII (c. 1235–1303).

The second-phase (97–111) directs attention away from history to the workings of providence. This account draws on the Aristotelian view (to be found in *De Anima* 3) which holds that Nature never does anything in vain. In keeping, however, with the view of divine order that he is exploring in the *Paradiso*, Dante goes beyond Aristotle and proposes a fully Christian understanding: it is divine goodness which moves all the spheres through which Dante is passing (97–9), and such goodness desires not merely that all things should exist but that, according to their nature, all things should move towards their own particular end or fulfilment (100–102).

Aristotle is also an influence upon the final phase of Carlo's argument. It is he who is the 'teacher' cited at line 120. Here Dante employs the Aristotelian idea of a city to define further the notion of ordered diversity: just as a city needs many different types of talent if it is to operate effectively (see Aristotle, *Politics* 1: 2, cited in *Convivio* 4: 4), so, too, does a perfect universe. To this notion Dante adds the further emphasis – drawn from the idea of a just court which underlies his meeting with the princely Carlo – that as in a perfect court, so in a perfect universe the talents of each constituent member of that universal 'court' will be justly recognized and celebrated. This concern with courtly recognition will grow stronger as, from *Paradiso* 23, Dante pictures his own ascent to the court of Heaven. But on earth such recognition is hard to attain (145–8). Human ignorance and malice here distort the providential disposition of talents. Human beings are not determined in any particular direction by genetic inheritance, but are guided towards their end by providence. Yet, through making priests out of persons who were destined to be warriors, or kings out of preachers, mortals confuse the providential design and contribute to the chaos throughout the Europe which is depicted in this canto.

NOTES

[34–9](#) In fact, between the *Convivio* and the *Paradiso*, Dante has changed his view of the exact order in which the angelic hierarchy is arranged. See commentary on *Paradiso* 28.

[58–60](#) This geographical periphrasis designates the county of Provence,

which lies to the left of the Rhône running south, below its confluence with the river Sorgue. It came to the Angevins as the dowry of Carlo Martello's grandmother. Compare *Paradiso* 6: 133–4 and *Purgatorio* 20: 61–2.

[61–5](#) The three towns mentioned here demarcate the horn of Ausonia (a classical name for Italy) and thus refer to the southern region of the peninsula, corresponding to the kingdom of Naples. The rivers Tronto, on the eastern side of the kingdom, and Verde on the west, divide the realm of Naples from the Papal States. Sicily is designated by references to the Pachino (Pachynus) to the south and Peloro (the modern Cape Faro) to the north. The whole island is dominated by the smoke of Etna. The passage draws extensively on Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 5: 350–53.

[75](#) Charles of Anjou was Carlo Martello's grandfather and Rudolph I of Hapsburg (1218–91) was his father-in-law. Compare *Purgatorio* 7: 94. Lines 73–5 refer to the Sicilian Vespers of 1282, when the population of Palermo rose against their Angevin overlords and invited the Aragonese dynasty, in the person of Pedro III (1285–91), to replace them.

[76–84](#) Carlo Martello's brother Robert was held as a hostage for his father in Catalonia by the Aragonese from 1288 to 1295 and, when he succeeded to the throne of Naples in 1309, he brought Catalan officials into his (generally mismanaged) government.

[124–6](#) The Athenian lawmaker Solon (638–558 BC) was considered the typical model of a statesman. The Persian emperor Xerxes (reigned 485–465 BC) was the model of a warrior, while Melchizedek, who features in Genesis 14: 18–20, was thought of as a model priest. The 'craftsman' here is the mythological Greek Daedalus, inventor, craftsman and father of Icarus.

[130–32](#) Esau and Jacob (Genesis 25: 21–34), though twin brothers, were entirely different, both temperamentally and physically: one was hairy, the other smooth. 'Quirino' is Romulus, whose father was low-born though his mother was royal. Romulus's strength of character earned him the favour of divine paternity.

CANTO 9

*Still in the Sphere of Venus, Dante encounters
Cunizza da Romano (who forgives herself for her*

*erotic impulses), and the troubadour poet and bishop
Folco of Marseilles, who speaks of the redemption of
the harlot Rahab.*

COMMENTARY

The narrative focus of [cantos 8](#) and [9](#) shifts constantly, concentrating sometimes on the dynamic workings of the angelic spirals, at others sweeping across the troubled political landscapes of Europe. Yet it also remains attentive to particular relationships of love, whether between human beings, the Seraphim and God, or between acquaintances such as Carlo Martello and Dante. [canto 9](#), concluding the encounter with Carlo Martello, opens ([1–6](#)) with an especial intimacy of tone as, in contrast to the grand, mythic allusions that opened [canto 8](#), he addresses Clemenza, wife of Carlo, who died shortly after her husband. Carlo has finally prophesied the treacheries that his royal house will suffer after his death. The reference is probably to an intrigue in 1296 involving Dante's *bête noire*, Pope Boniface VIII (see especially *Inferno* 19) which handed the succession of Naples to Robert of Anjou rather than to the son of Carlo and Clemenza. But a silent submission to the ultimate action of providence and a strengthening of bonds between person and person momentarily replaces polemic.

Though, as [lines 10–12](#) and [127–42](#) demonstrate, Dante cannot long restrain himself from political controversy, [canto 9](#) constantly depicts the relationship of love as the point of principle which is offended by political corruption. So a notable feature of Dante's rhetoric here is the invention of a neologism (as, for example, at [lines 73 and 81](#)) in which a reflexive verb is formed from personal pronouns: *mi* and *ti*, *lui* and *lei* (me, you, him, her) is combined with the prefix *in-* to define an intuitive and immediate relationship between one person and another whereby, as in love, one self is wholly inward of another self. In [canto 8](#) a similar relationship was envisaged in the complicated courtesies that Dante exchanged with Carlo Martello, where a relationship with divine love underpinned the reciprocity of human individuals. In [canto 9](#) the same inwardness, generated in the spirals of providential love, displays itself in two encounters as a source of personal conversion and of a polemical energy directed against the corruption of the world.

The first encounter ([19–66](#)) is with Cunizza da Romano (c. 1198–c. 1178),

the infamous mistress of the poet Sordello, who at the end of her sexually adventurous life came to Florence in about 1260. At this point, turning *eros* to *agape*, she granted freedom, before her death at the age of eighty, to all loyal slaves belonging to her father and brother. Nothing, however, is said about this pious act in [canto 9](#). Nor is Cunizza presented as some meltingly repentant Magdalene. On the contrary, the most striking aspect of her speech is that she forgives *herself* for the erotic excesses to which her temperament predisposed her ([34–5](#)). As is also made clear, at [line 103](#), there is, logically, no place in Heaven for repentance – since all awareness of sin has been erased by the penances of Purgatory. But Cunizza’s words go beyond the logic of theology, expressing an exuberant affirmation of self-confidence – which is also confidence in God – and a recognition that the colorations given to human temperament by astral influence are ultimately providential in character. The energy of her utterances contrast with the fatalistic languor of Francesca’s speeches in *Inferno* 5, and repeat, in more vigorous terms, the same recognition that Piccarda expressed in *Paradiso* 3: the purpose of divine order is to ensure not conformity but rather diversity in temperament and achievement.

The second half of Cunizza’s discourse ([37–63](#)) contrasts the contemplative energies which her conversion has unleashed with the decadence of her own family history and the political turmoil of northern Italy from Venice northwards to the Dolomites and Alps – an area that Dante, in exile, came to know well. Cunizza’s brother was the infamous tyrant Ezzelino III (1194–1259). Yet, as the conclusion of [canto 8](#) emphasizes, family traits are no more binding than temperamental dispositions. Providence frees the individual from any such deterministic shackles. So, communicating with the angelic order, Cunizza now launches an attack on the seemingly unbreakable cycle of strife that possesses the march of Treviso (now the Veneto) ([lines 43–60](#)), and in doing so summons up, at [lines 52–7](#), the harshest registers of rhyme and diction. ‘*Sconcia*’ – meaning ‘foul’ or, as here, ‘stinking’ – rhymes with ‘*bigoncia*’ – ‘tub’; ‘*malta*’ probably refers to a malodorous prison.

The second speaker in this canto ([lines 82–142](#)) is the troubadourturned-bishop Folco of Marseilles (fl. 1180–95). Folco is the third in a sequence of Occitan poets who have been given prominence in the *Commedia*. (Compare Bertran de Born in *Inferno* 28 and Arnaut Daniel in *Purgatorio* 26. See also *De Vulgari Eloquentia* 2: 6.) Dante does not here reproduce the idiom of

Folco's poetic voice as he did in the case of Arnaut. However, as if to signal a literary conversion on Folco's part to the classicism that Dante himself espoused in his devotion to Virgil, he does attribute to the troubadour a high degree of rhetorical skill (as in the periphrasis designating the Mediterranean sea at [lines 82–7](#)). Likewise, Folco's account of his amorous inclinations when young is marked by classical allusions to the story of Dido and Aeneas (compare *Paradiso* 8: 9) and other stories of heroic love drawn from Ovid ([97–102](#)). As to Folco's ultimate career after his entry, around 1195, into a Cistercian monastery, and subsequently as a bishop, Dante says nothing. This may seem surprising, for Folco was particularly involved in the crusade which the Dominicans pursued (see *Paradiso* 12) against the heretical Albigensians of southern France in 1209 – though at [line 126](#) Folco does criticize modern popes for failing to launch a crusade to the Holy Land. The crusade against the Albigensians was a peculiarly violent offensive, leading to the extermination of a culture that had contributed greatly to the development of modern vernacular literature. Yet the reasons why Dante may have sympathized with this crusade are implicit in [canto 9](#), and provide a subtext to Folco's speeches. The heretical aspect of Albigensian thinking lay in a certain dualism which sought to give priority to the spirit over the body and to encourage a detachment from the earthly life in favour of perfections that human beings could themselves achieve through ascetic exercise. Such a view runs directly counter to the Christian emphasis on the Incarnation of Christ and the subsequent revelation of an intrinsic relationship (as pictured in [cantos 8](#) and [9](#)) between the workings of providence and the painful but essential involvement of Christians in the sufferings of history. (Compare *Paradiso* 15–17.)

At [lines 112–26](#), Folco gives striking expression to such notions in the praise he offers to the last figure who appears in the Heaven of Venus, the prostitute Rahab. The story of Rahab, taken from Joshua 6, is central to the providential history of the Israelites. As the Israelites approach Jericho under the command of Joshua, two of their spies are sheltered within the walls of Jericho by Rahab, who is later saved from death when Joshua enters the city and destroys its other inhabitants. In subsequent Christian writings, Rahab is taken as the type of Gentile who, through her faith in the revelation granted to Jews and Christians, can be assured of ultimate salvation ([118–19](#)). But in the context of [canto 9](#), Rahab also stands as a parallel to Cunizza and equally as a contrast to the cult of spiritual perfection as practised by the Albigensians. It

is in and through our historical, physical and even sexual beings that we participate in the unrolling of providential purpose, and even the apparent sins of a courtesan or a harlot – which the Albigensian might have sought to rise above – can be reconciled with this continuing process. The last phase of the canto ([127–42](#)) contrasts such a reconciliation with the true ‘adultery’ that Dante invariably perceives in the institutional Church of his day (compare *Inferno* 19), where the Church’s appetite for the money that emanates from Florentine capitalism ([127–32](#)) produces an ever greater division between the angelic manifestations of contemplative *caritas* and the power politics of popes and cardinals. The Florentine florin (see introduction to the *Inferno*, pp. xix–xx) is an ‘accursed flower’ produced by Satan. In cultivating that degenerate crop, the Church, which should be the channel of providence, refuses to travel in thought to ‘Nazareth’ ([137](#)) for God’s own birth. The canto ends with a prophetic claim that the ‘burial ground’ of the Vatican will shortly free itself from such corruption.

NOTES

- [25–7](#) The area being talked about is the march of Treviso. Rialto is the highest of the islands composing Venice. The river Piave flows for 135 miles from the Alps to its estuary near Venice. The Brenta runs from the Trento region to the Adriatic coast south of the Venetian lagoons.
- [43–5](#) The Adige, which is the second longest river in Italy, rises in the Tyrol and, running parallel with the Po, passes Verona to flow into the Adriatic. The Tagliamento river runs from its source in the Dolomites to the Adriatic between Venice and Trieste.
- [46–8](#) In 1314, Can Grande della Scala (1291–1329), to whom probably Dante dedicated the *Paradiso*, defeated the Padian Guelfs. The river Bacchiglione, which forms marshes around Vicenza, ran red with Padian blood.
- [49–60](#) The rivers Sile and Cagnano conjoin at Treviso which was, at this time, ruled by the tyrannical Rizzardo da Camino, a militant Ghibelline who was assassinated in a Guelf plot of 1312. The ‘Clink’ or ‘*matta*’ may either signify a generically squalid dungeon or a prison on Lake Bolsena reserved for bishops convicted of crimes. The loss of ‘Ferrarese blood’ refers to the treachery of the Guelf bishop of Feltre, who in 1314 betrayed four Ghibelline refugees to Ferrara where they were executed.

- [61](#) The Thrones are third in the hierarchical order of angels. (For Dante's change of mind concerning the relative position of thrones and principalities (mentioned at *Paradiso* 8: 34), see commentary below on *Paradiso* 28.)
- [76–8](#) The six-winged Seraphim appear in *Isaiah* 6: 2. (Compare *Purgatorio* 29: 94–5.)
- [88–93](#) The Ebro is in Spain. The Magra flows into the sea near La Spezia and used to divide Genoa from Tuscany. Boughia, a port east of Algiers, falls on the same meridian as Marseilles. The massacre of the population of Marseilles occurred during the Roman civil wars when, in 49 BC, Pompey's supporters were slaughtered by Julius Caesar's navy.
- [97–9](#) In *Aeneid* 1:657–60 Cupid, disguised as Ascanius (Aeneas's son) lies in Dido's lap and deceitfully kindles her love for Aeneas. Creusa was Aeneas's wife, while Sichaeus was Dido's husband.
- [100–102](#) The Thracian princess Phyllis, whose palace was near Mount Rhodope, hanged herself, supposing she had been deserted by her lover Demophoon, son of Theseus. (See Ovid, *Heroides* 2: 147–8). Hercules (Alcides) deceived his wife Deianira when he fell in love with Iole. (*Heroides* 9: 127) (Compare *Inferno* 12: 67–9.)
- [112–26](#) The story of Rahab is told in Joshua 2 and 6. She is referred to as a figural example in Hebrews 11:31 and James 2: 25.
- [127–32](#) Satan's 'mean-ness of mind' is here seen to be a source of great suffering among the Florentines. The Florentine florin carried a lily on its obverse.
- [133–5](#) The Decretals are the texts of the Canon Law rapidly developing at this time as the Church's legal and bureaucratic exercise of power was extended.

CANTO 10

Dante enters the Heaven of the Sun and encounters Christian philosophers.

COMMENTARY

In [canto 10](#) Dante passes beyond the shadow that the earth casts into the universe. From this point until the end of [canto 22](#), he will travel successively

through the spheres of the Sun, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn. The souls who appeared in the lower spheres of Paradise still possessed the delicate outline of human faces. Now the figures that Dante meets display themselves as lights, fires and thunderbolts, all intensely active, all forming patterns – constantly varied from sequence to sequence – of circles, rectangles, illuminated words and rising spirals. Thematically, Dante's concern is with the various forms of moral energy that come to fruition in Paradise. Each of the heavens celebrates one of the four cardinal virtues – wisdom, courage, justice and temperance – and the souls who are named in these spheres are those who have devoted their lives, respectively, to philosophy, to self-sacrifice, to the pursuit of rectitude and to the cultivation of self-control.

The virtues for Dante do not require mere conformity to a divine *diktat*. (See introduction, p. xvii.) On the contrary, a virtue is an excellence potentially present in the very nature of a created being. To be virtuous is to train and display the range of dispositions that are most characteristic of a fully human life. Correspondingly, the exercise of reason will itself be a 'virtuous' activity, to be cultivated for its own sake and not simply for the results it might bring or the control it might give us over the world around us. It is this virtue that the Christian philosophers in particular display. So, in the sequence of cantos that begins at [canto 10](#), the historical figures that the poet here introduces are all, in Dante's judgement, '*philo-sophers*' in the fullest sense – which is to say, '*lovers of wisdom*'. Dante does not ignore the fact that even the pursuit of learning may, on earth, lead to violence and dissension. (See, especially, *Paradiso* 11: 1–9.) He does, however, envisage the fulfilment in Heaven of an appetite for learning which the philosophers pursued in their earthly lives and which continues to characterize all the words and actions that he attributes to them. Above all, the love of wisdom is seen to be a love of the order that divine wisdom displays in the construction of the universe and a desire to participate in the celebration of that order. As early as the *Convivio*, which is his own '*convivio*' or 'banquet' of knowledge (see introduction to *Inferno*, pp. xxxvii–xlii), Dante had displayed his taste for such philosophical food. The metaphor of intellectual nourishment here continues at [lines 6](#) and [22–7](#).

As in the *Convivio*, so in the Heaven of the Sun, Dante's intellectual enthusiasm generates an especially vigorous verbal rhythm, sometimes mirroring the rigour of intellectual inquiry (see *Paradiso* 13: 49–142), sometimes registering the emotions of discovery, ([lines 7–8](#) and [52–4](#)),

sometimes depicting the philosophical life as one of rhapsodic pleasure (*Paradiso* 13: 25–7 and 14: 28–30). However, the most striking feature of the episode, overall, is its formal structure. Here, as in the whole sequence until [canto 22](#), Dante creates a narrative which is characterized (as in music a fugue might be) by constantly repeated leitmotifs, images and delicately nuanced contrasts. Directly reflecting the interest that the sequence shows in notions of universal order, [cantos 10–14](#) are marked by the image of circular motion. The sun circles the earth; and wisdom is in part a matter of contemplating the mechanical order that prevails in the cosmos. But the organic cycle of the seasons is also dependent on the movement of the sun, and references to growth and fertility appear at every point. The actions of the philosophers are at one with this emphasis: the souls are described as ‘suns’ at [line 76](#), while at [lines 91–3](#) they are ‘enflowered’ garlands, and the lights into which they have been transformed perform a double-ringed dance. Dance here becomes an expression of the conscious and willing cultivation of formal pattern. Simultaneously, the sequence also develops a form of cross-rhythm in which an intellectual of the Dominican Order – Saint Thomas Aquinas – praises the founder of the Franciscan Order, while the Franciscan Saint Bonaventure praises Saint Dominic, founder of the Dominicans – each accompanying his praise with words of criticism directed at degenerate members of their own brotherhood, and implicitly at the mutual animosities that these two orders were guilty of on earth (see [cantos 11](#) and [12](#)). Here, as throughout the episode, the intellectual life is seen as a communal pursuit, drawing its strength from cooperation, but descending into confusion whenever *it* takes its eye off the underlying harmony of God’s creation.

[Canto 10](#) may be divided into three main sections, the first ([1–36](#)) concerning the astronomy of the Sun itself; the second ([37–81](#)) giving renewed attention to Beatrice as Dante enters the sphere of the Sun; the third ([82–148](#)) introducing the figure of Saint Thomas Aquinas as he names the twelve philosophers who belong to the inner circle of the two dancing rings.

The opening section runs in a particularly bold sweep, from an initial reference to the Trinity – where God is seen as the ultimate source of all visible order in the created world – to an address to the reader sitting attentively at the lecture bench, concentrating on the astronomical details that the author of the *Commedia* lays out for them to taste. The design of the universe, even in its smallest detail ([4–6](#)), offers evidence of divine wisdom. This is a justification for observing the universe with scientific precision. The

modern theologian and astrophysicist John Polkinghorne can point to the infinitesimally small probability that life on earth should have emerged as it has as an argument for divine intention. The slightest difference in the conjunction of physical and chemical factors during the evolution of the cosmic system would have led to a universe wholly bereft of what is now considered intelligent life. Dante, in similar fashion, looks at the oblique trajectory of the Zodiac across the equator as proof of the workings of providence: the angle of the Zodiac ensures that astral influence, along with the varied possibilities of life, are distributed as widely as possible across the terrestrial globe.

Yet at no point in these cantos does Dante detach this rationalistic understanding from his specifically Christian understanding of the Trinity as the ultimate reality of creative love on which the universe is founded. The first *terzina* of the canto offers a remarkable word picture of the Trinity, drawing on all Dante's resources of grammar to animate our understanding of this mystery. The activity of the Father is mirrored in the gerund (denoting continuous action) that opens the canto '*Guardando*'/'Looking'. The prepositions '*in*' (here in its compound form '*nel*') and '*con*' point to the intense reliance of the Father on the Son 'into' whom He looks, the unity of Father and Son with the Holy Spirit is asserted by the '*con*' ('with'), suggesting both simultaneity and agency. A single line reflects, linguistically, the three persons of the Trinity, each equal in contribution. And it is from this union, which is the primal source of worth and value, that the observable – and lovable – order of the cosmos descends. (Compare the celebrations of the Trinity in *Paradiso* 14: 28–9 – these lines so impressed Chaucer that he used them in his conclusion to *Troilus and Criseyde* 5:1863–5: 'Thou oon, and two, and thre, eterne on-lyve, / That regnest ay in three, and two and oon, / Uncircumscrip, and al mayst circumscribe...')

A distinction is sometimes drawn between theology, on the one hand, and Christian philosophy on the other, and Dante is often presumed to fall into the latter camp. (See introduction, pp. xxxviii–xxxix.) Yet the difficulty of making any hard and fast distinction is illustrated in the Heaven of the Sun, not only by Dante's constant awareness of trinitarian doctrine but also by the position that Beatrice occupies, especially in the second sequence of the canto. Her presence is a constant reminder that the purpose of Christian doctrine, even at its most rational, is to illuminate the Christian truths that ensure the redemption and resurrection of the persons – Beatrice being the

supreme exemplar – who would otherwise be subject to sin and death. (Compare commentary to *Paradiso* 7.) In [canto 10](#), Beatrice’s presence also alerts the reader to a surprising subtext. The dominant voices and names of the episode are all male. Yet the power of the feminine, associated with the *donna* – whether Beatrice or the Virgin Mary – is always an alternative point of reference. At times, such reference, as at [lines 55–60](#), can recall the extent to which, in his contemplation of Beatrice from the *Vita nuova* onwards, Dante has recognized that humility and self-abandonment are fundamental virtues in the spiritual life. (See introduction, pp. lvi–lvii and commentaries to *Purgatorio* 30–33). It also suggests that, beyond the aggressive and authoritative stance that Dante’s own position as a philosopher often requires of him, there is a recognition that truth requires deference as much as assertion. Indeed, it is a point of comedy that the dancing lights in which the philosophers are embodied are compared directly to ladies performing a courtly dance ([79–81](#)). Here, as throughout the *Commedia*, grace and charm of mind – or even playfulness – are scarcely less important as intellectual qualities than vigorous argumentation. Similarly, in the concluding lines of the canto ([139–48](#)), Dante presents a vision of order which combines reference to the perfect workings of clockwork with references to a marriage dance which allows unmistakably erotic suggestions to enter the picture of cosmic wisdom. So, too, at [lines 64–9](#) a complex effect of contradiction and synaesthesia arises as the virile energies of the lights surrounding Dante (‘flares’ flashing with vivid light) are compared to the hazy halo of light that is cast around the moon – here designated as the ‘daughter’ of Latona – when the air around the moon is dense and ‘gravid’.

Against this background the concluding phase of the canto is introduced by the figure of Saint Thomas Aquinas, who was in the avant garde of those Scholastic philosophers who applied Aristotelian methods to the discussion of Christian truths and who, in Dante’s time, still remained a controversial figure. (See introduction to *Inferno*, pp. xxxix–xli.) Dante was undoubtedly impressed by Aquinas’s philosophical example – he gives him a dominant role in the sequence, especially in [canto 13](#). However, it would be a mistake to suppose that Aquinas emerges simply as a systematic philosopher. Dante’s treatment of him includes a number of notable features. For instance, at [lines 82–96](#), Aquinas’s speech of welcome to Dante is marked less by philosophical clarity than by a courtly rhetoric involving highly complicated metaphors and circumlocutions, all of which introduce references to the

natural world along with sacramental suggestions. In paraphrase, Aquinas here declares that he cannot deny Dante an answer to his questions. Yet that apparent constraint is really a sign of freedom: to acknowledge the intellectual needs of another is to demonstrate the essential human desire for intellectual community, and to refuse would be the equivalent of denying sacramental wine to a communicant or of contradicting the natural process by which water always flows downhill. This is poetry not philosophy, or better, poetry *and* philosophy at one and the same time.

Then again, Aquinas, rather than asserting his authoritative position in Heaven, is concerned to introduce, with a comparable courtesy, the other members of the dance to which he belongs. The list of twelve names (to be matched by a further list in [canto 12](#)) is remarkable for the variety of thinkers that it includes – not only logicians but also historians, lawyers and grammarians, and even anti-rationalists such as Richard of Saint Victor (d. 1173). (See notes below.) Since the *Convivio*, Dante's own philosophy has been notably eclectic in character, drawing suggestions from a very wide variety of sources. This may be the mark of the amateur. But in the present sequence, Dante elevates eclecticism to an intellectual and ethical principle. Where philosophers on earth can be driven into violent polemic against one another, the true condition of wisdom is one in which harmony prevails between the most diverse positions. The most striking instance of this occurs at [lines 133–8](#). The figure referred to here is Siger of Brabant (b. c. 1240). The life story of Siger – who was officially condemned in 1277 and eventually murdered around 1283 by his secretary – illustrates how violent the intellectual life of thirteenth-century Paris could be. Siger's work drew on that of the Arabic philosopher Averroes in offering a defence of philosophical method and evoked ferocious condemnation from Aquinas himself. It seems that Dante, however, may have had some sympathy with Siger's position, in particular in the emphasis it laid upon the value of political justice in the secular world. While remaining as independent in his thinking as he always is, Dante here re-asserts the principle of wisdom as harmony and order and does not hesitate to reconcile Aquinas with his opponent, as he also does in *Paradiso* 12: 139–41, where the Franciscan Saint Bonaventure appears alongside his opponent – from the 'spiritual' wing of the Franciscan movement – Joachim da Fiore (c. 1132–1202).

[7–21](#) These lines refer to the time of Dante’s journey around the spring equinox, in the constellation of Aries the Ram. (See notes to *Paradiso* 1.) They meditate on the providential dispensation of the heavens which ensures that the sun’s heat nourishes rather than desolates the earth. The two motions that coincide are the daily movement of the planets on the celestial equator and the yearly revolution of the sun along the ecliptic. At the point of the Ram, the ecliptic crosses the celestial equator. The oblique circle is the Zodiac, an imagined circle around the Heaven of the Fixed Stars (18 degrees in width) within which the solar ecliptic keeps its path. The Zodiac lies at an angle of 23½ degrees north and south in respect of the equator, and this angle ensures an optimum distribution of celestial influences over the earth. The ‘straight course’ (line 20) is the equator.

[28–39](#) The minister of nature is the sun, the movement of which round the earth – between the winter and summer solstices – can be represented as a spiral.

[67–8](#) ‘Latona’s daughter’ is the Moon.

[97–138](#) The figures who appear in the first of the circular dances are: the Swiss Albertus Magnus (1193–1280), otherwise known as Albert of Cologne, bishop of Regensburg, who was Aquinas’s teacher and established Aristotle’s philosophy in the scholastic study of theology; and Saint Thomas Aquinas himself, born into a family of southern Italian aristocrats. Francesco Graziano (Gratian) (b. c. 1090) is the Tuscan Benedictine, who is said to have founded the field of ecclesiastical or canon law with his *Decretum* (1140–50), which attempted to reconcile the law of the Church with civil law. Peter Lombard (d. 1160), born near Novara, became professor of theology and bishop of Paris, writing an extremely influential *summa* of Christian philosophy, the *Sentences*. (See below, commentary to *Paradiso* 14.) The ‘fifth light’ is Solomon, son of King David of Israel; the sixth light is Dionysius the Areopagite, who was converted to Christianity by Saint Paul in AD 52, became first bishop of Athens and was thought to be the author of a work on the hierarchy of angels – *De Coelesti hierarchia* – to which Dante makes important allusions in *Paradiso* 8, 9 and 28; then there follows (probably) (lines 119–20) the Spanish historian of the fourth and fifth centuries Paulus Orosius (c. 385–420), whose *Historiarum adversus paganos*, dedicated to Saint Augustine, was widely used by Dante. Next is Boethius (d. 526), author of the *Consolation of Philosophy* (524), a work cited and used by Dante from

the *Vita nuova* onwards (as, for instance, in the depiction of Fortuna in *Inferno* 7). After his death in prison at the hands of Theodoric, king of the Ostrogoths, Boethius was buried in the church of Saint Peter, 'Golden Heaven Church', in Ciel d'Oro, Pavia. Bede of Jarrow in Northumberland (d. 735) composed the *Ecclesiastical History of England*; Isidore bishop of Seville (d. 636) wrote an early compendium of knowledge largely based around the study of Latin word structures, the *Etymologies*; Richard of Saint Victor (d. 1173) is probably a Scot who, at the Abbey of Saint Victor in Paris, was a colleague of Peter Lombard and produced influential writings on the contemplative life, notably the *Benjamin Minor*; Siger of Brabant was a controversial contemporary of Aquinas at the university of Paris (see commentary above).

[136–8](#) The medieval rue de Fouarre (Straw Alleyway) in Paris is now the rue Dante.

[142–4](#) This is one of the earliest known references to mechanically chiming clocks, which began to appear in Europe at the end of the thirteenth century.

CANTO 11

Aquinas, in the Heaven of the Sun, discusses an obscure phrase that arose in an earlier speech. He celebrates the virtues of Saint Francis and condemns the present corruption of his own Dominican order.

COMMENTARY

Dante places the highest possible value on wisdom, defined as the rational co-operation between human beings and God. Yet [canto 11](#) begins ([1–9](#)) with a viciously satirical attack on the many distortions and perversions to which rational procedure may be subject. Lawyers, doctors and priests, pursuing learning for the sake of gain, fly perversely ‘downward’ on the wings of thought that could be elevated (as in *Paradiso* 10: 7–9) to an understanding of the heavens. Here, as always in Dante’s polemic, greed is seen as the source of that perversion. It is greed – as the *Paradiso* particularly emphasizes – that distracts the intellectual appetite from its pursuit of the infinite, yet always available, goods that God is thought to offer. (See also *Paradiso* 30: 139–48 and commentaries to *Purgatorio* 16 and 17.) But Dante’s metaphor of perverse flight also recalls the ‘crazy flight’ which ruined the intellectual aspirations of Ulysses at *Inferno* 26: 125. The target of Dante’s attack is not merely the pursuit of material advantage but also the divisions and disproportions that can be generated by intellectual ambition.

These considerations provide a contrasting background to the main concern of [canto 11](#), that is, the virtue of poverty as exemplified in the life of Saint Francis of Assisi (1182–1226; canonized 1228). In a sequence running from [line 43](#) to [line 117](#), the Dominican Saint Thomas Aquinas applauds the example of Saint Francis just as the Franciscan Saint Bonaventure will celebrate the example of Saint Dominic in [canto 12](#). Each, in a coda to their words of praise ([118–39](#); compare with *Paradiso* 12: 112–23) criticizes their own order in the light of the other for having strayed, through perverse appetite, from the example of their founding father. That criticism is the stronger since at *Paradiso* 11: 34–9 God is seen to have intended the two orders to work together each in their different ways for the furtherance of his providential purpose. Saint Dominic will provide an example of intellect such as the cherubim display; Saint Francis, as the seraphim do, will offer an example of love or *caritas*.

The original friars – both Franciscan and Dominican – had formed their communities at a time of rapid economic growth in the Italian cities, and had carried their example of poverty into the heart of the new urban environment. Indeed, Saint Thomas Aquinas, born into a noble clan, had shocked his family by his decision to pursue the life of a mendicant rather than that of an

aristocratic monk. So, too, as Dante here records, Saint Francis – famous in his youth for his chivalric flamboyance – directly set himself against the bourgeois principles of his merchant father. Saint Francis never became a priest, but the community he founded was accepted by Pope Innocent III in 1209 – partly, perhaps, as a political stratagem to defuse a growing wave of revolt against the new mercantile ethos, which had begun to produce revolutionary and heretical tendencies. (Contrast Dante’s response to Fra Dolcino in *Inferno* 28.) In 1224, Saint Francis received the mystic stigmata, in perfect imitation of Christ, on Monte La Verna. Stories of his sanctity quickly spread and the order grew rapidly, so much so that divisions surfaced among the Franciscans (see *Paradiso* 12: 130–38) between the ‘Spirituals’, who advocated strict and literal adherence to the rule of poverty (with whom Dante seems to have sympathized), and the ‘Conventuals’, who favoured a more traditionally monastic form of life.

The emphasis of Dante’s account – in the context of the Heaven of Christian philosophers – falls as much upon the intellectual and spiritual implications of poverty as upon its political and economic consequences. Thus poverty, in one aspect, is seen as a way to perfect security of mind. For instance, [lines 67–9](#) briefly recall the example of the poor fisherman Amyclas – to whom Dante also refers in *Convivio* 4: 13 – who was able to refuse the demands of Julius Caesar for transport across the Adriatic precisely because he had nothing to lose. More emphatically, poverty is seen as the way in which human beings may associate themselves with the wisdom of God as represented in the person of Christ. This wisdom involves the acceptance, even through suffering, of an order that transcends the partial appetites of selfseeking individualism, and takes pleasure in the place it occupies in the universal order. It is this poverty that produces in Saint Francis’s own *Hymn of Brother Sun* (compare commentary to *Purgatorio* 13) a delight in the brotherhood of all created beings, parallel to Dante’s own celebration of his union, with the Sun in *Paradiso* 10:

May you be praised, my Lord, with all your creatures
And most of all by our brother Sun
By whom we are illuminated every day.

Lauda Creaturarum, stanza 2

In *Paradiso* II, however, Dante emphasizes the joy that comes, paradoxically, in the acceptance of limit and self-abandonment. Just as Saint Francis embraces Poverty as if she were a lover, so Poverty herself willingly

leaps on the Cross with Christ ([58–75](#)). This notion of willing poverty of mind is incorporated into the themes of [canto 13](#), where Saint Thomas Aquinas speaks of the value of intellectual restraint, and into the themes of civic discipline that are central to [cantos 15–17](#).

In keeping with such notions of intellectual poverty, both this canto and the next are notable for their fundamental plainness, even primitiveness of language and style. The early, most influential records of Saint Francis's life were cast in the form of anecdotes and folk tales (as in his *Vita prima* (c. 1228) of the saint by Thomas of Celano), imitating, to some degree, the Gospels in the way that Saint Francis's conduct imitated Christ. In canto II Dante's own language for the most part avoids the philosophical registers that appear in [canto 13](#) and the elevated hymnody of [cantos 10](#) and [14](#). Yet, experimenting here as in [canto 12](#) with a deliberately archaic style, Dante weaves a highly complex fabric, most strikingly in his portrayal of the love affair between Saint Francis and Lady Poverty ([58–75](#)). In terms of literary genre, this is in part a rather simplistic allegory (as Dante confesses with something approaching comic irritation at [lines 73–5](#)) and in part a fable. The lady whom Francis loves is the widow of Christ and old and off-putting in appearance – partly a Mary Magdalene, partly a 'loathly lady' or magical hag. Yet, as some princess transformed by the attention of a lover, she attracts not only Francis but all his early followers who (again in a passage of farcical energy at [lines 82–4](#)) fling off their sandals as they rush to follow, discovering riches in Poverty that are hidden to the world. Intertwined with these features, however, there is a highly chivalric diction, representing Saint Francis (against his own outward poverty of appearance) as a courtly lover, or even as a king, when he regally reveals his message to Pope Innocent III ([92](#)) or boldly enters the court of the sultan of Syria ([100–104](#)).

Then finally there is the consideration on the etymology of 'Assisi' at [lines 49–54](#). (Compare *Paradiso* 12: 70–81.) Though entirely unlike the scientific account of the sun's movements found in [canto 10](#), this meditation leads the eye, in search of the rising sun, from the oriental Ganges to the hills of Umbria, revealing the perspectives of providential design. The world is full of meanings waiting to reveal themselves. Like the word 'Assisi' or the figure of Lady Poverty, or the stigmata that Francis bore on his body for two years ([107–8](#)), the signs that bear such meaning may at first be difficult, even painful to read. But to persevere is to cultivate another form of philosophical wisdom.

NOTES

[37–9](#) The seraphim are angels of love, the cherubim of wisdom.

[43–8](#) The position of Assisi in Umbria is defined by reference to the river Topino and the river Chiascio, which has its source north-east of Gubbio, near the hermitage of Saint Ubaldo. The mountain above Assisi is Monte Subasio. Its west slope (less steep than the eastern slope) faces Perugia. The Porta Sole or Sun Gate of Perugia is the one nearest Subasio. The town of Perugia feels the effect of sun and cold from the mountain. East of Subasio are the towns of Nocera and Gualdo, which suffer, or weep, from the effects of Apennine weather.

[52–4](#) Dante plays on the (fanciful) etymology of ‘Assisi’, which in the Tuscan of Dante’s day was known as ‘Ascesi’, taken here to mean ‘I rose’. (Compare the etymologies at *Paradiso* 12: 79–81.) The only appropriate designation, however, would be ‘Orient’, derived from the Latin *oriari*: ‘to rise up’.

[61](#) Dante here, to dignify the scene with legal terminology, invents a Latin phrase meaning ‘in the presence of his father’.

[79–84](#) Bernardo da Quintavalle (fl. c. 1210), a prosperous merchant of Assisi, was the first follower of Saint Francis; Egidio was described by Thomas of Celano as ‘a poor and timorous citizen of Assisi’; Silvestro was a priest of the town.

[91–8](#) In 1210, with some reluctance Pope Innocent III gave his verbal blessing to Saint Francis’s order. Official sanction of his rule was given by Pope Honorius III (1148–1227) in 1223. ‘Archimandrite’ in Greek signifies the ‘leader of a flock’.

[100–102](#) In 1219, during the Fifth Crusade, Saint Francis visited the Sultan Al-Kamil (d. 1238), who was reputed to be sympathetic to Coptic Christians, but was disappointed with the results of his preaching.

[103–8](#) On the very precipitous slopes of Monte La Verna, between the upper Arno and the source of the Tiber, Saint Francis received, mystically, the wounds of Christ on his own body, which remained visible for two years, as the ultimate sanction of his mission.

CANTO 12

*A second circle of twelve philosophers appears, to
join the first. Saint Bonaventure tells the story of*

Saint Dominic's life.

COMMENTARY

The themes of [canto 11](#) and its linguistic characteristics are mirrored – with significant variations – in those of [canto 12](#). The opening sequence ([1–30](#)), returning to the scene in Heaven, describes the appearance of a further ring of twelve philosophers who join in the dance with the first that Dante had witnessed. The second ring includes Saint Bonaventure, who became Minister General of the Franciscan Order in 1257, produced the first extensive philosophical writings in response to Saint Francis's example, and later became a cardinal. In contrast with the writings of Aquinas, which are strongly marked by Aristotelianism, Bonaventure's philosophy tends to adopt a neoplatonic emphasis, and a rich, sometimes emotive rhetoric, drawing attention to the power of the mind to rise up in love and contemplation to union with the divine, seeking, as in the opening of his *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum* (*The Journey of the Mind into God*) (1259)

the peace which our Lord Jesus Christ has proclaimed and has given; the renewer of whose preaching was our Father Francis, announcing at the beginning and end of all his preaching peace, in every salutation choosing peace, in every contemplation longing towards ecstatic peace as a citizen of that Jerusalem concerning which the man of peace speaks.

It is sometimes argued that Dante's idea of a spiritual journey from the dark wood of Florentine politics to the new Jerusalem of God's presence is directly influenced by Bonaventure's writing. (See *Paradiso* 31.)

In the sequence at [lines 31–145](#), Saint Bonaventure matches Aquinas's account of Saint Francis's life with a eulogy to the founder of the Dominican Order of preachers, the Spanish Saint Dominic (1170–1221; canonized 1224). Saint Bonaventure's speech is marked by some of the consciously simplistic devices that were employed in [canto 11](#). Yet the opening phase is composed of highly sophisticated verses which bring together – as Dante so frequently does at the height of his virtuosity – references to both classical and biblical sources. The image of the circle, dominant throughout the Heaven of the Sun, is now transformed by the simile of [lines 10–18](#) into the image of a rainbow. The classical allusion to the hand maid of Juno points to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 1: 270–71, where Iris – the rainbow – is referred to as the messenger of the gods. The visual image of mirroring in the double rainbow is then translated into aural terms through a reference to the legend of Echo ([14–15](#)), again drawn from Ovid. (See *Metamorphoses* 3: 339–401.) The

emphasis is upon the celebration of exquisitely strange but natural phenomena, hazy and fading, yet beautifully replicated each in each. And, by virtue of such classical allusion, these effects are also seen in terms of tragically unrequited love: the nymph Echo was consumed like vapour in the heat of the sun by her fruitless love, as was Narcissus in adoration of his own reflection in the water. In each case, the classical text offers images of vain repetition, of frustrated doubleness. (Compare *Paradiso* 3:16–18.) But then, at [lines 16–18](#), Dante alludes to the rainbow that was sent by God to Noah as a covenant of peace, a promise that the world would never again be flooded. (Compare the double rainbow of *Paradiso* 33: 115–20.) Here, the unity, value and stability of the natural world is re-asserted, as it has been throughout the Heaven of the Sun, on the foundation of the indissoluble relationship between humanity and its Creator, and the opening sequence ends with a renewal of the dance, delineated in elevated Latinate terms such as *tripudio* ([22](#)), signifying – as, in the translation, does ‘galliard’ – a triple-time dance.

The account that Bonaventure proceeds to offer continues to celebrate the beauty of natural order, as in [lines 46–54](#), which imagines westerly spring breezes (Zephyrs) blowing through Europe and homing in on the birthplace of Dominic in Calaruega, close to the Atlantic coast of Castile. Throughout the canto, Saint Dominic is seen, in one aspect, as the ‘farmer’ of Christ ([71](#) and [86–7](#)), charged with the proper cultivation of the natural world. But he is also seen, at [line 56](#), as ‘*santo atleta*’, ‘champion’ athlete, here deriving from the Greek to signify a wrestler and, in Church Latin, to signify a martyr or ‘champion’ of Christ. In Bonaventure’s own *Life of Saint Francis* 2: 2–3 (1261) the term had originally been used in praise of Saint Francis. It is, however, consistent with the courtesy and harmony that Dante wishes to depict here between the Franciscans and the Dominicans that the term should be transferred to Saint Dominic. But where Saint Francis was seen in terms of a courtly lover, Saint Dominic is represented as a chivalric warrior whose birthplace is identified by the armorial bearings of the kings of Leon and Castile ([53–4](#)), a shield showing lions and castles in alternate quarters.

Where Saint Francis’s early history was told through a relatively primitive allegory, Saint Dominic’s birth narrative ([61–87](#)) is presented in terms equally far from Dante’s mature style, yet characteristic of one strand in medieval literary practice, the cultivation of etymological significances. Etymology had been a feature of the work of Isidore (mentioned among the

philosophers at *Paradiso* 10: 131), and was an important if, in retrospect, artificial way of preserving the learning of the classical world, through the annotation of usages to be found in Latin and other early tongues. Here Dante uses the device to speak of the parentage of Dominic. Dominic's own name is said, at [line 69](#), to be the grammatical possessive of the one to whom he totally belonged – *Dominus*: the Lord God. At [lines 79–81](#) his father's name, Felice, derives from the Latin *felix*, denoting the 'happiness' that the father experiences in his offspring, while his mother's name, Giovanna, derives from Hebrew, signifying 'the grace of God'. Alongside this somewhat archaic rhetoric – possibly reflecting the dictum found in the *Vita nuova* 13: 4 that names are 'the consequence of things named': '*nomina sunt consequentia rerum*' – at [lines 70–75](#) Dante introduces a more complex play on words, only possible within the rhyme scheme that he has devised for the *Commedia* when, here as elsewhere (for instance, at *Paradiso* 14: 104–8), he refuses to rhyme the name Christ with any word except itself, thus producing a three-fold repetition of that name. Human names may be subject to variation and etymological play, but the name of Christ remains stable and self-identical, the ground in which all other baptismal names take root.

[Lines 82–105](#) allude to the mature works of Saint Dominic. His devotion to poverty (in founding a mendicant order) is stressed, as at [line 75](#) where he adheres to Christ's commandment to love the poor. His learning does not lead him to follow the example of canon lawyers such as Henry of Susa, bishop of Ostia (d. 1271), or rich physicians such as the Florentine Taddeo d'Alderotti (d. 1295), who founded the medical school in Bologna. (Compare *Paradiso* 11: 4–9.) Nor does he ask for remuneration, diverting, as the Roman Curia did, the ten per cent tithe intended for the poor to his own uses. At [line 93](#) Dante adopts the curial Latin phrase for such tithes and these lines are marked throughout by a parodic use of the official jargon that was employed to justify the abuse of Church revenues. Instead, he asks of the pope of the day, Innocent III, for a commission to combat religious error and is granted this in 1216 by Innocent's successor, Honorius III. This sanction leads in particular to Dominic's crusade against the broadly dualistic heresies of the Albigensians of southern France (see commentary to *Paradiso* 9), a violent 'torrent' ([99](#)) of activity which led to the extinction of Albigensian culture.

As Bonaventure turns in the final phase of the canto ([103–45](#)) to attack the degeneracy of his fellow Franciscans, the language becomes especially dense, employing a rapid mixing of metaphors which is characteristic of some

prophetic writings of the late Middle Ages. In a single *terzina* ([112–14](#)) the Order is compared to a wonky cartwheel and musty wine, while subsequent *terzine* allude to bad harvests and poorly written pages. According to Bonaventure, the true Franciscans will not include figures such as Ubertino da Casale (1259–1338) and Matteo d’Acquasparta (1240–1302) ([124–6](#)), representing the two warring factions among the Franciscans – the former an extreme ascetic ‘Spiritual’, the latter (General of the Order from 1287), a ‘Conventual’ who pursued a more conciliatory policy.

The canto ends with a heroic list of those who accompany Bonaventure in the second circle of the dance performed by the Christian philosophers. This list ranges widely in time back to the earliest centuries of the so-called Dark Ages and in geography throughout Europe, pointing sometimes to theological efforts that pre-dated the advent of Aristotelian scholasticism and to the achievements of those such as Rabanus Maurus (c. 780–856), who maintained intellectual continuity between the earlier and later phases of Christian thinking. Particular mention needs to be made of Joachim da Fiore (c. 1145–c. 1202) ([140–41](#)), who was once visited by the crusading Richard the Lionheart. As the Cistercian abbot of Corazzo in Calabria and founder of the monastery of Saint Giovanni in Fiore, Joachim developed a very influential philosophy of history; in which the march of history is viewed in prophetic terms as the progressive revelation of God’s truth. Joachim offers an Apocalyptic vision of the Antichrist. But he also sees the three major phases of history as reflections of the three aspects of the Holy Trinity. His writings were at times viewed as heretical, and Bonaventure is sometimes said to have opposed their implications as vehemently as Aquinas opposed the teaching of Siger of Brabant. (See commentary to *Paradiso* 10.) There is a case, however, for saying that Dante was influenced by Joachim’s visionary and prophet mode of thought, as well as by his interest in the providential workings of history.

NOTES

[58–69](#) According to legend, before Dominic’s birth his mother dreamed that she would give birth to a black and white dog with a flaming torch in its mouth. The Dominicans (on a false etymology) were taken to be the ‘dogs of God’ – ‘*domini canes*’ – and their religious dress is black and white. The torch represents the energy that Dominic displayed in opposing

heresy. The second dream ([64–9](#)) came to Dominic’s godmother and showed the saint with a star in his forehead – signifying his ability to illuminate the world with orthodox doctrine.

[91–3](#) The fullest translation of Dante’s Latin here is ‘times which are meant for the holy poor’

[94–6](#) The twenty-four ‘saplings’ are the philosophers who form the double dance.

[130–41](#) Illuminate da Rieti and Agostino di Assisi were among the earliest (and therefore truest) followers of Francis. Hugo of Saint Victor (d. 1141) was a Fleming who became a canon of the Abbey of Saint Victor in Paris and contributed to the growth of an Augustinian form of mystic spirituality (compare Richard of Saint Victor, (*Paradiso* 10: 131)). Pietro Mangiadore (or Petrus Comestor) (d. 1179) was a Frenchman, chancellor of the university of Paris and author of a major commentary on biblical history. Pietro Hispano (Peter the Spaniard) (1226–77) became Pope John XXI in 1276; his twelve-volume *Summulae logicales* (c. 1150) combats the neo-Aristotelianism of Albertus Magnus and Aquinas. Nathan is the Old Testament prophet who spoke out against King David’s adulterous liaison with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 12). Saint John Chrysostom (d. 407), Patriarch of Constantinople, preached against the corruption of the Church. Saint Anselm (1033–1109) became Archbishop of Canterbury and wrote the very influential treatise *Cur Deus Homo?* (see commentary on *Paradiso* 7). Donatus was a fourth-century Latin grammarian and probably teacher of Saint Jerome, whose *Ars grammatica* was a standard text throughout the Middle Ages. The German Rabanus Maurus, Archbishop of Mainz, wrote an extensive encyclopaedia, *De Universo*, and biblical commentaries.

CANTO 13

Aquinas explains why Solomon is to be seen as the wisest of all human beings, offering a detailed interpretation of a phrase used in [canto 10](#). He gives a philosophical account of the structure of the universe to demonstrate how Solomon differs from Christ and Adam. The canto concludes with a warning against over-hasty judgements.

The style of [canto 13](#), in thought as well as in language, is markedly different from that of the cantos that immediately precede it, drawing far more on sophisticated argumentation than on word play or folk tale. The speaker in the major phase of the canto ([34–142](#)) is Thomas Aquinas. He has been an important presence in [cantos 10](#) and [11](#). But now he addresses a subject which extends far above the questions of religious politics that arose in discussion of the Franciscan and Dominican orders. He not only confronts the question of what wisdom is, in its human form, but also reflects upon the origins and nature of the human being. Referring to a comment he made in [canto 10](#), line 114, Aquinas now offers to explain why the wisest man that ever ‘arose’ was King Solomon. It would have been natural to expect that the wisest of men would be either Adam or Christ, the divinely appointed embodiments of perfect humanity, not a Hebrew sovereign. But Dante, with his characteristic appetite for problematical positions, complicates the issue in pursuit of his own emphasis. And there is a further complication here. Given Aquinas’s reputation and central role in the present episode, he might himself seem to qualify for Dante’s ultimate praise. Yet it is Solomon who speaks at the climax of the episode in [canto 14](#). As to *why* he does, Aquinas’s arguments and the treatment of Solomon in [canto 14](#) will make clear. Meanwhile, in [canto 13](#) Aquinas is presented as a model of Christian rationality. It was Aquinas who wrote in his *Opusculum*:

It would scarcely accord with the character of divine goodness were God to keep his knowledge to himself without disclosing himself to others, since to be generous is of the nature of goodness.

Against that background of such confidence in rational discussion of the divine, Aquinas now exemplifies the ways in which Christian philosophers should argue and use language. The philosopher should, in Dante’s view, be as precise and careful as Aquinas is in his choice of words, as discriminating as he is systematic at every stage of his argument.

At [lines 37–51](#), Aquinas – reading Dante’s thoughts – draws him into the biblical history of creation and redemption with concentrated and allusive phrases in which Adam is referred to as the ribcage from which Eve, with her ‘lovely cheek’, was formed, while Christ is the one whose side was ‘pierced by the lance’ as he hung on the Cross. But then there begins a close, analytical concentration on the exact meanings of particular words and their implications.

The purpose of Aquinas’s speech is to explain ([106](#)) the exact force of the

word ‘surse’ – [Solomon] ‘rose’ – which was first applied to an otherwise unidentified philosopher at *Paradiso* 10: 114. On this depends a crucial distinction between Solomon, on the one hand, and Adam and Christ, on the other, in that, while all three figures are fully human, they did not all ‘rise’ or come into being in the same way. To clarify this distinction, Aquinas has first to explain (52–90) the structure of the universe as it descends from the divine act by virtue of which all things, in one way or another, originally came into being.

The speech is marked by a powerful syntax, enforced by repetitions, clear-cut *caesurae* and line endings, giving solemn emphasis to central terms and concepts. All things, whether transient or immortal, come into being through the love of God and all ‘new’ things – which is to say all things that do not exist from eternity as God alone does – reflect the ‘splendours’ of God’s design. However, there are two ways in which creatures can come into being. (For an excellent account of this question, see Boyde, pp. 235–69.) ‘Creation’ is a term properly reserved for those things that are created directly or without intermediary (‘*sanza mezzo*’: compare *Paradiso* 7: 67 and 70) by God, such as the angels or the human soul. At the same time, there is a ‘generative influence’ (66). Things are generated when they come into being through the indirect action of God, that is through the action of Nature, which is the system of physical, chemical and biological laws that God has set in motion. Nature at the furthest remove from God’s direct action produces the good but transient things to which Dante refers, at lines 65–6, as ‘brief contingencies’, which is to say generated things. But in the act of generation, Nature is not always perfectly in control, but rather behaves like an artist whose hand trembles at times (76–8), departing from the intended plan. Human beings are unique in the cosmos, insofar as their souls are created – without intermediate action – by God, while their physical properties are generated by Nature. The union of body and soul is indissoluble and it is good that human beings should exist in this fashion. (Compare *Purgatorio* 25 and *Paradiso* 7: 124–48.) However, in two cases – that of the first created man, Adam, and that of the Christ, as the second Adam – providence ensured that the hand of Nature did *not* tremble but rather followed the divine purpose exactly (79–87). But this is true only in these two cases, so Solomon is no way comparable with either of them.

Once this is clarified, the argument returns to the word ‘surse’ and argues that this must be taken to indicate the ascent to a throne and therefore to

kingship. It is here that Dante's most striking emphasis occurs. Having just invoked the full range of speculative thought that Aquinas might be taken to exemplify, he now designates kingly wisdom as the highest form of philosophy. Referring, at [line 94](#), to the scriptural account in 1 Kings 3: 5–12, which speaks of Solomon's prayer to God, Aquinas identifies the height of Solomon's wisdom to be his asking for sufficient practical wisdom to rule his kingdom for the greater good of his fellow human beings. Unlike those who concern themselves with the fine detail of theoretical or speculative knowledge, Solomon sought only to benefit his subjects. Parallel to the satirical account that opened [canto 11](#), Dante now produces a parodic sequence of tags in Latin (98–100) indicating the theoretical and speculative questions that contrast with Solomon's political interests. In the uncertain realm of generated existence – of 'brief contingencies' – there is a peculiar need for justice in the distribution of limited goods, honours and rewards. The well-being of the human community depends on this, and the height of wisdom, on this account, is to care for the human community, in the pursuit of justice. (Solomon's words 'Love justice, you rulers of the earth' (Wisdom of Solomon 1: 1) are elaborately quoted at the beginning of the sequence from [canto 18](#) to [canto 20](#) which is concerned with the virtue of justice.)

The Aquinas whom Dante has constructed in the Heaven of the Sun stands alongside the Virgil who appears in the first two *cantiche* of the *Commedia*, and the Ulysses of *Inferno* 26, as a mirror to some of Dante's most fundamental thoughts about the proper conduct of a rational life. The lesson – also confirmed by Solomon in [canto 14](#) and consistent with the meaning of Franciscan poverty – reveals humility as an essential factor in intellectual endeavour, involving an accurate identification of what we are capable of doing and what we need to do. It is this emphasis that Aquinas is shown to pursue in the final phase of [canto 13](#), at [lines 109–42](#). Notably, the argumentative rigour and rhetorical elevation that marks the middle phase of the canto gives way here to colloquial wisdom, to recommendations comparable to warnings that we should not count our chickens before they are hatched: we can never be sure that a ship will come to port; roses that seemed to be dead in the winter may still flower unexpectedly in spring ([133–8](#)).

Such caution applies also to our moral judgements, so that churchdoor gossips must not suppose that they know that an upstanding member of the community will be saved while the thief will be condemned to Hell ([139–42](#)).

This is a remarkable admonition, bearing in mind that Dante appears to have spent the whole of the *Inferno* in confident judgement of his fellow men. Yet the passage at [lines 112–20](#) expresses one of the fundamental principles of Dante’s intellectual and poetic style: an extreme concentration and precision in moving from word to word, position to position. In *Inferno* 26, the rush of Ulysses’ ‘crazy flight’ contributes directly to his downfall. In *Inferno* 21: 42, Dante contemplates with horror the ways in which, when corrupt officials buy and sell their assent, the very bonds of social order are eroded. The care over words characterizes alike the etymologies of [cantos 11](#) and [12](#) and the fine distinctions and rigorous syntax of [canto 13](#).

Yet rigour is not the only product of intellectual humility. Nor is it inconsistent with Aquinas’s argument and analytical procedure that [canto 13](#) should begin (as [canto 10](#) concluded) with a passage of celebration that even includes elements of intellectual comedy. Wishing (in [lines 1–21](#)) to give some plausible impression of the dance performed by the philosophers, Dante invites his reader to survey the constellations of the universe and, mentally disassembling the patterns these maintain, to picture fifteen single stars from among the brightest in the firmament. This procedure involves precise attention to the observable phenomena of the divinely created order, and the pleasure of this intellectual activity is partly that of observation and partly that of actively re-fashioning the given design. But [line 18](#) introduces a further pleasure, in which a comic turn invites us to acknowledge the illusion that the preceding lines have led us into. After all this great expense of intellect and imagination, we shall, it now appears, still stand at least twice removed from any accurate understanding of what the reality, for Dante, was. And that is as must be in a world of contingencies – even when these contingencies are the pure luminosities of the stars. None the less, the human mind is still authorized to play its intellectual games with the features of the created world. (See introduction, p. Ixiii, and commentary to *Paradiso* 4.) The life of wisdom – like the life of poverty – is not simply a pursuit of absolute certainties, but a talent for play and intellectual pleasure, observing, as play always does, the rules and conditions under which our chosen activity proceeds.

NOTES

[1–18](#) Imagining the twenty-four brightest stars in the northern hemisphere,

the reader is asked to think of the fifteen major stars in Ptolemy's system, the stars of the constellation of the Wain, the seven stars of the Great Bear (Ursa Major) and two from the Little Bear (Ursa Minor), these two stars being at the mouth of the Horn and furthest from the North Star. Lines 13–15 refer (inaccurately) to the legend of Ariadne, daughter of Minos (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 8: 176–82), who was deserted by Theseus and befriended by Bacchus, who set Ariadne's crown in the skies as a constellation to ensure her continuing fame.

[22–4](#) The comparison is between the fastest moving of the heavenly spheres – the *Primum Mobile* – and a sluggish Tuscan stream, the Chiana.

[25–7](#) 'Peana' is one of the names for Apollo.

[97–102](#) *necesse*: 'necessary'. This parody of scholastic inquiry (into an issue also debated by Plato and Aristotle) points to the futility of questions such as whether, from an absolute premise and 'contingent' premise, one can draw a necessary conclusion. '*Si est dare primum motum esse*': 'Whether primal motion is to be assumed' indicates the question of whether it is possible to admit in the universe a primary motion independent of all others. The final speculation concerns the question of whether, given a semicircle, one can inscribe in it a triangle which is not a right-angle triangle.

[124–6](#) Bryson, Parmenides and Melissus are Greek philosophers of the fifth century BC, mentioned in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, as cited in *De Monarchia* 3: 4: 4.

[127–9](#) Arius (d. 336) and Sabellius (d. c. 2,65) are heretics, the former exerting wide influence in his contention that Christ was not consubstantial with the Father, the latter calling into question the doctrine of the Trinity.

[139](#) Aquinas comes down briefly to the level of street-corner comedy, speaking of church-door gossips with the familiar names 'Berta' and 'Martino'.

CANTO 14

*Solomon speaks of the Resurrection of the Body.
Vision of Christ on the Cross. Transition from the
Heaven of the Sun to the Heaven of Mars.*

[Canto 14](#) records Dante's movement, at [lines 67–90](#), from the Heaven of the Sun to the Heaven of Mars, where he will consider the virtue of courage displayed particularly by Christian warriors. But the canto is dominated by reference to the two events that are central to Christian understanding: the Crucifixion and the Resurrection. At the point of transition, Dante claims to have seen a vision – which he is unable to describe – of Christ on the Cross, and subsequently the courageous will appear to him, not in a ring dance as did the Christian philosophers, but contained as flashing lights within the columns and crossbars of a cruciform display of light.

In the narrative sequence of the *Paradiso*, it is significant that the Cross should appear, against the historical sequence of the Gospels, *after* the Resurrection. As will emerge in the Heaven of Mars, Dante is profoundly aware of the extent to which the Christian life has to be led as a passion within the strife-riven circumstances of temporal existence. Ethical courage and Dante's own militancy as a poet demand no less. It is equally characteristic of him that he should look beyond time to that ultimate (if paradoxical) affirmation of our physical integrity that will come on the Day of Judgement with the resurrection of the dead – when, returning to the human body, we shall be totally complete ([44–5](#)). (Compare *Inferno* 6: 94–115.) It is also significant that the consideration of Christian wisdom should culminate in Solomon's hymn to the resurrected body which develops in [lines 37–60](#) in a rhapsodic crescendo of repetitions, alliterations and light imagery: reclothed in 'flesh', the physical organs will 'increase' in vision as 'fire' or ardour 'increases' and as the light of that ardour also 'increases'.

In what way is this ecstatic vision of a mystery an appropriate conclusion to an episode that has been concerned to cultivate a philosophical attention to the workings of the created universe? And why should it be that reference to resurrection is allocated to Solomon, a Hebrew king celebrated for his 'kingly wisdom' in the previous canto? The two questions are connected. For if kingly wisdom is the height of all wisdom, then the sphere of earthly things – the 'brief contingencies' that gave birth to Solomon himself (*Paradiso* 13: 63 and 91–105) – and, especially, the physical form of the human body must themselves deserve to be celebrated. And this, in a Christian perspective, is entirely consistent with the implications of Christ's history on earth. (Compare *Paradiso* 7:124–48). Thus a telling reference is made to the Incarnation when Solomon's modest voice is compared to that of the Angel

Gabriel at the Annunciation ([36](#)). Throughout his career, Dante has consistently referred to the writings attributed to Solomon in the Old Testament and the Apocrypha to articulate his growing understanding of the relationship that exists (and is ultimately revealed in Christ) between human wisdom and the creative wisdom of God.

In the *Wisdom of Solomon* – a great influence on the Dante of the *Convivio* – Solomon repeatedly rejoices, as Dante does throughout the *Heaven of the Sun*, in the orderly structure of the universe:

Within Wisdom is a spirit intelligent, holy, unique, manifold, subtle, active, incisive, unsullied, lucid, invulnerable, benevolent, sharp, irresistible, beneficent, loving to man, steadfast, dependable, unperturbed, almighty, all-surveying, penetrating all intelligent, pure and most subtle spirits, for Wisdom is quicker to move than any motion, she is so pure, she pervades and permeates all things. She is the breath of the power of God.

The Wisdom of Solomon 7: 22–8

At the same time, Solomon, as the author of the *Song of Songs*, takes a profound delight in the value and significance of the human body:

This thy stature is like to a palm tree, and thy breasts to clusters of grapes. I said I will go up to the palm tree, I will take hold of the boughs thereof: now also thy breasts shall be as clusters of the vine, and the smell of thy nose like apples.

Song of Solomon 7: 7–8

This great erotic love song was frequently the subject of allegorical interpretation, as in the hands of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), who saw human love as an expression of the love between God and the Church or the human soul. Dante will take Bernard as his final guide in [canto 31](#). (See introduction, pp. lv–lvi.) Yet, by drawing on Solomon, Dante clearly does not discount the importance of the erotic. The conclusion of [canto 10](#) has already reflected the imagery of erotic love in its comparison of the philosophical dance to a wedding morning and in the unmistakably sexual action of [line 142](#). That same spirit is apparent in the unambiguous reference to ‘flesh’ at [line 43](#). And it is thus entirely fitting that the response to Solomon’s hymn should be the ‘Amen’ of [lines 62–6](#), in which the Christian philosophers display an apparently naive desire to recover their ‘long dead bones’ before they became ‘sempiternal flames’.

Philosophers, we might suppose, would aspire to pure flame-like intellect, and, certainly, the philosophical adventurer Ulysses whom Dante depicts in *Inferno* 26 was shown to pride himself on his ‘burning’ ambition. It is consistent, however, with the lessons in modesty and restraint that both Saint Thomas and Saint Francis have exemplified in previous cantos that such attitudes should lead to a clearer view of the value that resides in the detail of

the created world, and supremely in the lineaments of the human form. Notably, the language in which the philosophers speak is itself markedly low in its register, the ‘flame’ of *sempiterna fiamme* rhyming with the vernacular form of the ‘Amen’ – *Amme* – and the most intimate word, ‘*mamme*’ – ‘mummies’ – for those whom the philosophers long to see again in the flesh. The height of wisdom, then, does not lie in speculation, but in a renewed exercise of our faculties and our specific beings.

The transition to the Heaven of Mars (which will be the subject of [cantos 15–17](#)) begins at [line 67](#), and contrasts in tone, imagery and diction immediately begin to appear. The geometry of the cross stands in marked contrast to that of the circle, expressing less an interest in harmony than in tension. Light here is a brilliant scintillation, concentrated within the beams of the cross. Words are stretched against the inexpressible, drawing on latinate forms (e.g. ‘*litare*’ - ‘offering’; ‘*fausto*’ – ‘propitious’ at [line 93](#)), on forms drawn from the chivalric vocabulary of France (*addobbare*: ‘to dub’ or ‘bestow a knighthood’ at [line 96](#)), the Greek ‘*olocausto*’ / ‘burnt offerings’ of [line 89](#) and a surprising neologism combining the Hebrew for God (*Eli*) with the Greek for ‘sun’ in ‘*Elios*’ also at [line 96](#). Yet neither here nor elsewhere does Dante lead one to suppose that his words will ever reach so far as to encompass the reality of God. Where visual artists of the period and some poets (such as Jacopone da Todi) had begun to offer direct and painful depictions of Christ’s passion, Dante never attempts even this, still less a description of the Godhead. Suggestively, language is here seen as a sacrifice, an offering of the words we have to a reality greater than any that words can define. (See discussion of ‘ineffability’ and apophaticism in the introduction, pp. viii–lix.) Such tensions as these are appropriate to the themes of self-sacrifice that will emerge throughout the Mars sequence. But here, as in the previous section, there is a subtext, suggested by the fact that for Dante Mars is not only the planet of war but also the planet of music. As Dante explains in the *Convivio* 2: 13, Mars resembles music in two ways: it instils passion into the heart, but it also produces harmony – since in the planetary system Mars occupies the central point, holding the rest of the planets in position. Thus, in [lines 118–23](#), there occurs the first of a series of references to musical phenomena in which a melody runs through the cross, holding Dante enraptured even though he does not understand its meaning. Again, the theological implication must be that, beyond words and comprehension, the sufferings and insufficiencies to which the human being

is subject are at one with an ultimate harmony. (Compare *Paradiso* 15: 37–42.) At the same time, this understanding will not distract attention from the temporal world – to which Dante in the following cantos will devote most of his attention. It is consistent with his praise of Solomon’s wisdom that thoughts of ultimate harmony should not be taken as a comfort in the face of the suffering that an engagement with the vicissitudes of temporal existence imposes. At no point in the *Commedia* does Dante discuss more directly the sufferings of his own exile than in [canto 17](#). It is equally true that the value that Dante attaches to the objects of the created world, when properly seen, continues in the Mars sequence as it began in the Heaven of the Sun.

[Canto 14](#) began with one of Dante’s most delicate similes. The dance performed by the philosophers is compared to the movement of water to and from the centre of a round vessel: the same rhythms, the same undulations and circles that can be traced in the movement of the intelligent mind and in the movement of the heavens is observable in the simplest and most ordinary of phenomena. But the same understanding arises out of [lines 109–17](#), where the sparks of light in the beams of the cross are compared to motes of dust in the sunrays shining through a makeshift roof. This passage may well have been suggested to Dante not only by observation but also by the science of the poet and philosopher Lucretius, who posits a universe of atomic particles constantly conjoining and reforming. (See Lucretius, *De rerum natura* 2: 115–19.) As a Christian philosopher, Dante would have no problem with such a universe. He would, however, insist, as here, that the pleasure and purpose of such a universe could best be understood in the light of Christian history.

NOTES

(See commentary above.)

CANTO 15

*Entering the Sphere of Mars, where the virtue of
courage is celebrated, Dante meets his twelfth-century
ancestor, the crusader Cacciaguida.*

COMMENTARY

At the centre of the *Paradiso* are three and a half cantos which are set in the Sphere of Mars and concern the virtue of courage, as exemplified particularly by Dante's great-great-grandfather, Cacciaguida (1090–1147), of whom nothing is known except that he was knighted by Emperor Conrad III and died on the Second Crusade in the Holy Land.

The dominant image of this sequence is the Cross. Whereas in the previous canto the Christian philosophers danced in circles, expressing their participation in the harmonious movements of the created order, the courageous are represented here as intense points of light, moving with certain agitation to form the disciplined right-angles of the Cross, thereby associating their sufferings with the redemptive sufferings of Christ. The emphasis here is on energy, concentration and discipline (for instance, at [lines 19–24](#)). Yet a feature of this sequence is that Dante's understanding of courage does not lead him into triumphalism or any crude celebration of Christian expansionism. (Even when he does speak of the 'infidel', the blame for the advance of Islam falls equally upon the corrupt and negligent papacy of his day. (See *Paradiso* 15: 142–8.)) On the contrary, the sequence is above all concerned with peace, and especially with the peace that prevailed (on Dante's nodoubt idealized view) in the Florence of Cacciaguida's day around the middle of the twelfth century. Courage emerges in these cantos as, above all, a capacity for 'taking pains', of living and working with others in pursuit of high principles and of the values embodied in day-to-day life. Such a quality reflects Christ's Incarnation and suffering within and for the sake of the earthly world. This virtue (and the society that depended on it) has in Florence been swept away by a new order built, not upon courage, but on greed and mercantile expansion. A tragic awareness of what Florence has lost stands at all phases of the sequence, in counterpoint with Dante's celebration of what Florence once was and might be again.

In the course of this sequence, Dante addresses some of the most important questions that concern him in the *Commedia*. The very decision to devote the central cantos of the *Paradiso* to a minute analysis of Florentine history confirms the view that, for Dante, Christianity is concerned not with transcendence but with history, with the redemption and fulfilment of human possibilities rather than deference to some divine code. Courage here involves the courage to be human. In parallel, especially in [canto 17](#), Dante concerns himself with the reasons he might have for writing the *Commedia*. This is the most explicitly autobiographical sequence of the *Commedia* and,

even though this autobiography involves (as does the vision of an ideal Florence) a great deal of invention and personal myth-making, it also includes the most moving evocations of Dante's exile. (See *Paradiso* 17.) But the sequence concludes with a recognition that his task in writing the *Commedia* entails courage; indeed, it will be a crusade that involves the danger of conflict with all those historical persons whose relatives and kinsmen Dante has (in some cases) condemned to Hell for their corruption. Through the mouth of Cacciaguida he counsels himself to name names, to be specific and make the highest trees – the most eminent personages of his day – shake at the sound of his wrath.

This concern with his own place in history as Florentine and poet unrolls against a background of more general themes concerning the politics of the city, the political and moral consequences of greed, the actions of fortune and the workings of providence. In the central cantos of the *Inferno* Dante presented a series of Florentines from previous generations – notably Farinata and Brunetto Latini – through whom he could lament the failure of previous generations to secure the happiness for Florence that its destiny – especially as a direct descendant of Rome – seemed to promise. Cacciaguida, along with others of his generation, represents what a Florentine citizen could have been, and through him Dante expresses a continuing devotion to the small city state as, properly, the place where citizens can live out their moral lives. Ideally (see introduction to *Inferno*, pp. xxv–xxvi), a city is a place where individuals collaborate in a harmony of moral understanding and display in the details of their daily behaviour their devotion to the common good. [Lines 112–29](#) picture such a life in the restraint and modesty that characterized Cacciaguida's contemporaries, and in the stories, at children's bedtime, of the ancient dignity of Florence. It remains true that all things are changeable in what the Aquinas of [canto 13](#) called the realm of 'brief contingencies'. Even cities decay over time, and so do noble families. (See *Paradiso* 16: 79–84.) This decay is made worse when greed prevails and distracts attention from the sacred centre or else, as was particularly the case with Florence, when the city swells through immigration to such a size that the moral examples offered by individuals are obscured. See *Paradiso* 17: 49–72, where Dante offers a pretty exact account of the effects of economic migration, while at the same time betraying what can only be called a dangerous tendency to racism. The influx of new people from the countryside surrounding Florence pollutes the sacred seed of Florence, which ultimately descends from its

foundation by Imperial Romans. (Compare *Inferno* 15.) Against such decadence, Dante imagines a number of solutions. Some lie in the endurance of lineage – as between Cacciaguida and himself – which ensures that a moral ‘gene’ can be passed down even if it skips certain generations. Note particularly the imagery of growth that regularly appears here (especially at *Paradiso* 17: 13). Crusading poetry, too, such as Dante sets out to write himself, may rekindle the moral language which was once the natural idiom of the city state. And then, governing all, there is the great ‘book’ of providence. (See [lines 49–51](#) and *Paradiso* 17: [37–42](#)) In this book, beyond all the changes wrought by fortune, by decadence or, in Dante’s case, by exile, there are purposes and meanings, instituted particularly through the sufferings of Christ, which allow the conflictual activity that Mars represents to be reduced to an ultimate harmony. It has been noted that Mars, though best known as the planet of war, is also (in the allegory that Dante constructs in the *Convivio* – see [commentary to canto 8](#)) the planet of music, where passions and tensions are productively reconciled in overall harmony. This accounts for the many references to musical effects that punctuate the sequence, and in particular for the great image that inaugurates the sequence in [canto 14](#), lines 118–23, where the Cross itself seems to become a musical instrument.

As all these themes unroll, the Mars sequence develops narrative and linguistic features which, though highly original, can also seem very forbidding. By the conclusion of the sequence, it becomes clear that, for Dante, poetry has a duty to engage directly (and sometimes polemically) with specifics – with particular people, particular families, particular names which, even in his own time, had been forgotten, and equally with particular places within the tiny confines of ancient Florence. Such specificity is a characteristic of Dante’s poetry. Here, though, there is an evident danger – especially in [canto 16](#) – that the lists of people and places will pass the modern reader by. One cannot even pretend that these lists have the resonance of an epic catalogue. They are too often accompanied by local knowledge, allusion and innuendo which seem designed to catch the Florentine ear alone. Looking simultaneously from Cacciaguida’s past and from the melancholy vantage point of his own exile, Dante’s eye falls on precisely those decades in the thirteenth century when Florence fought out the pressures of economic development in the street-corner scuffles of newly arrived families and competing commercial interests. It was at one of these

moments in particular that the Guelf-Ghibelline divisions in Florence began, instigated by a dishonoured marriage agreement. Thus, at the end of [canto 16](#), lines 136–47, Dante in the space of merely twelve lines allusively recounts the conflict that began between the newly arrived Buondelmonti and the Amidei, when Buondelmonte dei Buondelmonte (d. 1216) reneged on his engagement to an Amidei girl, in favour of a pact with the Donati, and was assassinated.

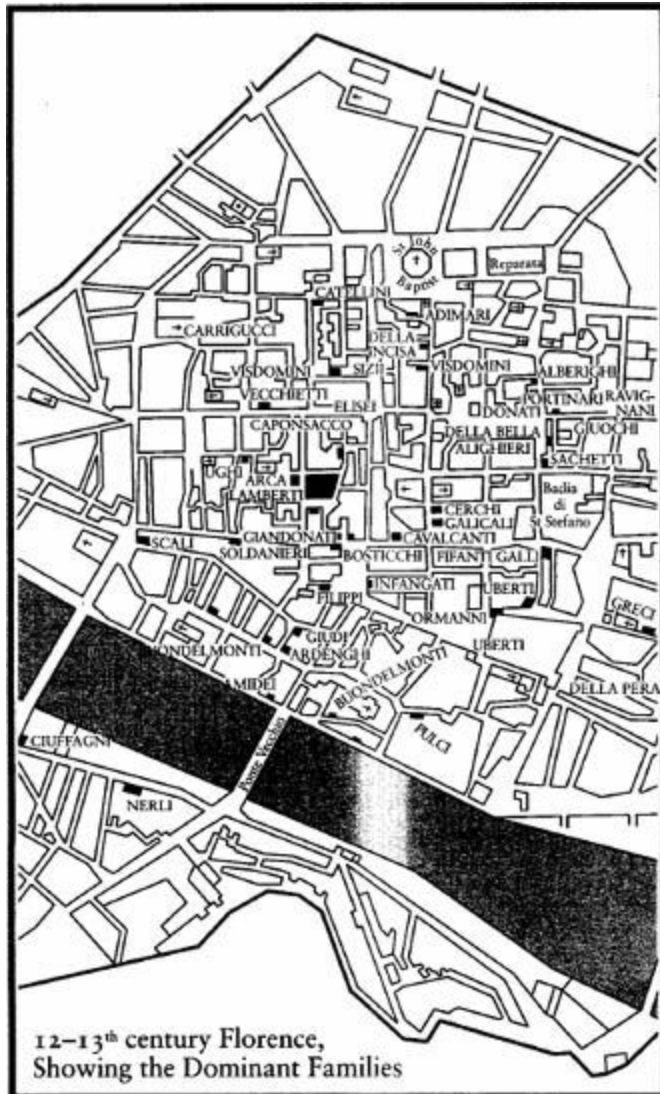
Notes can do something to remedy the remoteness of this contemporary *cause c  l    bre*, especially in drawing attention to the contrast between these later times and the earlier days when Guelf and Ghibelline families existed in mutual respect. But so, too, can a firm sense of design. The map on page 396 show the extent of Cacciaguida’s Florence, still contained within its ancient first circle of walls, in earshot, at every point, of the bells of the Badia church ([97–9](#)). This map also identifies three points of particular importance which are referred to throughout the sequence. One is the Baptistry. This, in Cacciaguida’s time (and since the time of Charlemagne), had been the centre of both religious and civic life in Florence, the place where names were given at the annual baptismal ceremony for all the Florentine newborn of that year. This was where, ideally, a Florentine entered fully into the life of the city, and Dante never ceases to regard it as the hub of all that is best in Florence. (Compare *Paradiso* 25: 1–9.) The second is the statue of Mars, the ‘battered stone’ ([146](#)) – under which Buondelmonte was slain – that stood at the foot of the Ponte Vecchio, representing simultaneously a proud Roman inheritance and a long history of conflict. Thirdly, there is the Mercato Nuovo – the market place – to which many of the new immigrants gravitated (as at *Paradiso* 16: 103). These three locations establish the leylines – or battlelines – along which the countervailing pressures of these cantos proceed to run.

So the episode is an exercise in the poetry of history. But history – or Dante’s personal history in [canto 15](#) – is also transformed into a peculiarly daring fiction. Throughout the *Commedia* Dante has been accompanied by Virgil, himself a fictional father acting as a surrogate for all those failed fathers of Florentine extraction that people the central cantos of the *Inferno*. Now Dante looks back into his family history and discovers a model that will serve to define his own best intentions. There is something faintly comic about this, as Dante himself momentarily recognizes when he shows Beatrice alerting him to a moment of potential pomposity when in *Paradiso* 16: 10–12

he presumes to employ an ancient and honorific form of address to his forebear. There can be no doubt that Dante is here seeking to associate himself with the chivalric status of Cacciaguida, as well as with his moral example as a crusader. He is claiming for himself a prestige which the Alighieri family in his own day could hardly aspire to. At the same time, the great theme of a son seeking a father – a thirteenth-century anticipation of Stephen's search for Bloom in James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922.) – assumes mythic proportions, as a background to all the historical detail of the episode, especially at the outset when, at [lines 25–7](#), Dante compares his meeting with Cacciaguida to the meeting between Aeneas and Anchises in the underworld as described in *Aeneid* 6. Indeed, Cacciaguida's first words are from the *Aeneid* – Virgil has not been forgotten. Nor could he be, if the destiny of Florence requires it to rediscover its Roman roots. But Virgil has been subsumed into Cacciaguida, and also in large part transcended. For, wholly unlike the meeting in Virgil's melancholic underworld, the present episode evinces at every point an energy and luminescence which promises, despite the fret of Florentine politics, an ultimate fulfilment which Virgil could never have anticipated.

NOTES

[28–30](#) 'O blood of mine! O overflowing grace of God! To whom, as to you, was ever the Gate of Heaven twice flung open?' In these Latin phrases Dante brings together allusions to Virgil's *Aeneid* 6 (especially line 836) with allusions to the familiar biblical diction of Saint Paul's epistles. (The adjective '*superinfusa*' appears to be constructed on models to be found in Romans 5: 20 and Ephesians 1: 8.)



[73-5](#) God is the 'Primal Equipoise' in that all the attributes of God are infinite and therefore equal and balanced one with the other.

[91-3](#) Cacciaguida's son took the name Alighiero (or Allagherius) which derived from the family name of Cacciaguida's mother. At [line 137](#) below, Cacciaguida's mother is said to have come from the Po valley, possibly from Ferrara where at this period there seem to have lived a family called Alighieri.

[103-5](#) The age of marriage had not yet become unreasonably low nor dowries extravagant.

[106](#) Sardanapalus (685-627 BC), king of Assyria, was renowned for his luxurious tastes and decadence. (See Juvenal, *Satires* 10: 362.)

[109](#) Montemalo (Monte Mario) is a hill overlooking Rome; Uccellatoio (here translated as the 'Aviary') is a hill overlooking Florence. The

implication is that Florence has now outstripped Rome in building high and ostentatious monuments.

[112–15](#) Bellincion Berti dei Ravignani (c. 1150– c. 1200), the moral exemplar of ancient Florence, was the ancestor of the Conti Guidi, the Counts Palatine. Conte Guido Guerra spent his youth at the Imperial court, but shifted his allegiances to the Guelf cause. He appears among the Sodomites in *Inferno* 16. The Nerli and del Vecchio are, likewise, ancient Florentine families.

[127–9](#) Cianghella della Tosa (c. 1260–90), notorious for her licentiousness, is also mentioned by Giovanni Boccaccio in his misogynistic *Corbaccio* 228–30 (?1365). Lapo Salterello, a prominent lawyer in Florence in the late 1200s, enjoyed a high reputation, except among White Guelfs such as Dante and the chronicler Dino Compagni. Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus (c. 519–438 BC) the ploughman ruler of Rome, and Cornelia Africana (c. 190–100 BC), the virtuous mother of the Gracchi, are also mentioned respectively at *Paradiso* 6: 46 and *Inferno* 4: 128.

[133](#) The name of the Virgin Mary, as invoked by women in labour.

[139](#) Conrad III of Swabia (1093–1152) commanded the Second Crusade of 1147–9, along with Louis VII of France.

CANTO 16

*Cacciaguida speaks of the decline of the great families
of ancient Florence and of the subsequent decline in
the city's moral climate in the thirteenth century.*

COMMENTARY

Though [canto 16](#) will be characterized increasingly by an awareness of the crises that shattered Florence in the thirteenth century, it begins on an intimate, self-mocking note, in which Dante contemplates a vein of pride, or even snobbery in his own character.

In common with many city intellectuals of his time, Dante was much concerned with the true nature of nobility, and argued against any suggestion that nobility was a matter of rank or inherited riches. In the *Vita nuova*, he, along with other poets of the *dolce stil novo*, claimed that a capacity for love must be among the attributes of the noble heart. In the *Convivio*, he

demanding that wisdom, intelligence and an interest in philosophy should likewise be regarded as defining features of true nobility. None of these criteria disappears in the *Commedia*. But his interest in Rome, as the original founder of Florence, leads to an emphasis upon the almost genetic connection between the past and the present and, specifically, in constructing for himself the father figure of Cacciaguida, Dante seems aware of, and even comically awkward about, the extravagant claims he is making for his own lineage: nobility is a boast even on earth, and he in Heaven – resuscitating the example of a remote and scarcely visible forebear in the otherwise hardly illustrious Alighieri line – has even greater reason to glory in his ancestry. (Compare the discussions of family characteristics in [cantos 8](#) and [9](#).)

The embarrassments of such a claim are emphasized by the expression of amusement that Dante attributes at [lines 10–15](#) to Beatrice, who notes Dante’s self-aggrandizing use of the plural pronoun ‘voi’, following a Latin usage which was instituted when Julius Caesar made himself emperor, in place of the more intimately colloquial ‘tu’ (translated here as ‘thou’ – an example of the slightly archaic features of, in particular, Cacciaguida’s speech). Beatrice’s response identifies two other features that complicate the stylistic and poetic texture of the narrative. At [lines 13–15](#), Dante compares Beatrice to the Lady of Malhous, who in the Old French romance *Lancelot du Lac* (compare *Inferno* 5: 127–38) is secretly in love with Lancelot and coughs to alert Guinevere to the danger of her own first meeting with him. In a sequence much concerned with military chivalry, this allusion alerts one to the strand of romance narrative, concerning quests and trials, which is intertwined with the Virgilian epic throughout the *Commedia*. Likewise, Beatrice’s intervention here – even though she is silent elsewhere in the sequence – displays an unmistakably feminine subtext, which began at [canto 15](#), lines 121–6, with a reference to the mothers who first told the ancient stories of Florence’s Roman history to their children. Such muted allusions now continue in a sequence of references to the Virgin Mary, to childbirth and botched marriages (initiated by the scheming Gualdrada of the Donati who inveigled Buondelmonte into marriage with her own family).

So war and politics are not Dante’s only points of reference here. His underlying concern is with peace and family harmony. But from [line 34](#) the canto becomes an increasingly tense account of internal strife among the tight-knit families of Florence. Reference to childbirth gives way to a designation of time passing ([37–9](#)) which invokes the ferocious cosmology of

Mars and the constellation Leo: by the time of Cacciaguida's birth the planet Mars had entered the constellation of Leo 580 times since the Annunciation. And the references now are to men of arms-bearing age living between the Baptistery and the statue of Mars – it is estimated that in 1100 there were 30,000 such men.

What follows is a dense and often elliptical account which is not always easy for the modern reader to penetrate, but which might be compared to one of those tragic stories from recent history where hitherto peaceable communities have been torn apart by a sudden revival of ethnic or sectarian disputes. (See notes below.) Dante begins by picturing displacements in the demographic map of Tuscany which were the result of both immigration in pursuit of economic success and of military expansion, which led to the fall of fortresses and feudal power centres in the countryside around Florence (49–67). [Lines 73–135](#) speak first of the effects of fortune, which are visible in the rise and fall of cities and families, and proceeds – sometimes elegiacally, sometimes polemically – to list the great families of Cacciaguida's era, many of which had now passed from view. The conclusion of the canto, from line 136, focuses on the origins of the internal strife that was to tear Florence apart throughout the thirteenth century.

NOTES

[40–42](#) Races were run annually along the Corso in Florence on Saint John's Day (24 June). The finishing line was located near the Mercato Vecchio.

[49–57](#) Campi, Certaldo and Fegghine (now Figline) were country towns under Florentine influence, which produced many immigrants into the city. The villages of Galluzzo and Trespiano stood, respectively, about three miles south of the old city walls of Florence and four miles north. Aguglione is in the Val di Pesa, while Signa lies on the Arno, west of Florence. The 'peasant' and the 'cad' referred to here are probably Baldo and Fazio Morunbaldini (c. 1280–1320), eminent lawyers whose ancestors had been immigrants. Contemporaries of Dante, these two men seemed to have attracted his condemnation through their opposition to Emperor Henry VII, whom Dante supported.

[58–60](#) Dante here, as usual, attacks the Church of his day for interfering with the Empire in its pursuit of justice, in particular for entering into financial alliances with the new Florentine mercantile classes to support its political

ambitions.

[64–6](#) This list of third-generation immigrants (sometimes subsumed into Florence by virtue of Florentine expansion) refers in turn to the Velluti family (probably) from Semifonte, a fortress town in the Val d'Elsa, south-west of Florence; and to those who came from the castle of Montemurlo, north-west of the city, which Florence acquired by forced sale from the Ghibelline Conti Guidi in 1254. The Cerchi were leaders of the White Guelfs, the party to which Dante belonged, during the tumultuous period around 1300 which ended ([96](#)) with the jettisoning of the party (including the exiled Dante) from power in 1302. Originating from Acone in the Val di Sieve, they bought the palace of the Conti Guidi in 1280. The Buondelmonti were Guelfs, credited with causing the conflict in the first place. (See [notes to canto 15](#).) Their castle of Montebuono in the Val di Grieve had been taken by Florence in 1135.

[73–132](#) Having dealt with immigration and military expansion, Dante now looks at the effect of fortune on Florentine families, noting how some once-great families have simply disappeared. Cities themselves (lines 73–5) can pass out of existence, through disease or warfare, as has already happened to Luni in Tuscany and Urbisaglia in the Marche, and will happen to Chiusi in the Val di Chiana and Sinigaglia. The families mentioned here have left little trace, save in Dante's praise of them – or at times his condemnation. The Ravignani (line 97) were the ancestors of the powerful Conti Guidi. The Delia Pressa clan (line 100) held public office. The Galigai (line 102) were Ghibellines of chivalric rank – hence their hilt and sword. Again referring to chivalric and heraldic imagery, Dante identifies the Pigli family by the diagonal band of fur ('Pale of Vair') across their arms. The Sacchetti (line 104) were an ancient Guelf family, while other families mentioned in this *terzina* have sunk without trace, including the Chiaramontesi who 'blush' to think of their ancestors who – when salt commissioners – used false measuring instruments.

At line 106, the 'stock' is that of the Donati family (still very influential in Dante's day – see *Purgatorio* 23 and 24 and *Paradiso* 3). But the Calfucci who sprang from them have gone, as have the Sizii and Arrigucci who once occupied positions of authority. 'Those now destroyed by their own pride' (lines 109–10) but are otherwise unnamed are the great Uberti family. (See especially Farinata degli Uberti, who has a central role in *Inferno* 10.) Like the Uberti, the Lamberti – identified by the golden balls of their coat of arms

(line no) – were of German descent.

The unnamed families of lines 112–14 were probably the Visdomini and the Tosinghi, who acted as (corrupt?) administrators of episcopal revenues when the See of Florence fell vacant. The ‘bullying crew’ (lines 115–20) were the Adimari. Their descendants included Filippo Argenti, who appears in *Inferno* 8 in violent conflict with Dante. Ubertino of the noble Donati clan was ashamed of even the remotest taint of relationship with the crass Adimari: having married a daughter of the great Bellincione Berti (see *Paradiso* 15:112–15), Ubertino ‘looked askance’ when Bellincione gave another of his daughters in marriage to the Adimari.

The Caponsacco, Giudi and Infangati (lines 121–3) are yet more Florentine families which have either faded from prominence or become extinct. The Pera family (line 126) gave its name to one of the main entrances into the old city (now the Porta Peruzzi) but has now utterly vanished. At lines 127–32, Dante is once again concerned with feudal chivalry. The ‘great baron’ (line 128) is the Imperial vicar, Hugh of Brandeberg, marquis of Tuscany, who died in 1001 on Saint Thomas’s day (21 December), and who is consequently remembered and revered at every ‘Thomas feast’ in the abbey in Florence where he is buried (one of seven that he founded). A number of families not named in these lines (the Giandonati, Pulci, Nerli, Gingalandi, Ciuffagni) were knighted by Hugh and bear in their own arms references to the baron’s armorial bearings. One of these descendants, however, is Giano della Bella (1250–1300) (referred to at lines 131–2), who in 1293 introduced the *Ordinamenti di Giustizia* (Ordinances of Justice) which severely curtailed the privileges of the ancient noble families.

[133–44](#) Attention now begins to fall once again on the factional strife that arose initially between the Buondelmonti and the Amidei but spread to the whole of Florence, (see [commentary and notes to canto 15](#).) The newcomers, the Buondelmonti, settled close to the Gualterotti and Importuni – hence, by circumlocution, it would have been better if the latter had not had ‘the neighbours that then came’. Best of all (lines 142–4) would have been if God had drowned Buondelmonte in the river Ema, which he had to cross on his way from his original home into Florence.

[151–4](#) The canto, having been much concerned with heraldic designations, concludes with a picture of the desecration, in the course of partisan strife, of the Florentine flag. In 1251, when the Ghibellines were driven out of the city, the Guelfs altered the Florentine standard, which originally bore a

white lily on a red field, to a red lily on a white field. The Ghibellines continued to use the original design.

CANTO 17

Cacciaguida speaks prophetically of Dante's future life, urging him to be courageous in the face of exile and in writing his account of his journey through the other world.

COMMENTARY

The focus of [canto 17](#) is Dante himself, in whose person and works the history of Florence – and any future it might have – are now seen to reside. Dante critics are accustomed to speak of three distinct Dantes: the historical Dante, who was a Florentine exile; the traveller (sometimes referred to as the pilgrim) through a fictional other world; and the poet rewriting history with a profound sense of his own mission and talent. [canto 17](#) explores all three, yet, far from suggesting that the various aspects of Dante should be sharply distinguished, here they are seen as inter-related elements of a constantly developing self, a Dante who still has a story to tell and a destiny to pursue.

At [lines 61-9](#) Dante alludes cantankerously to his own political isolation, which led him (for reasons that are not now apparent) to split from even his fellow White Guelfs and ‘form a party on [his] own’. Then, at [lines 55–60](#), he movingly evokes the miseries of exile, including the bitterness of climbing the stairway of another man’s house. (Notably, Dante’s principal patron, of whom he speaks at length at [lines 70–93](#), was Can Grande della Scala – ‘of the Stair’.) Yet the literal stairways of Dante’s various lodgings need to be seen against the redemptive stairways that he has been climbing in the course of his fictional journey. Metaphorical as these may be, they indicate the spiritual remedies that make exile tolerable and significant. The poet, too, is involved in an act of reconstruction, which entails not only such acts of self-assessment as his (unlikely) confessions of timidity at [line 118](#), but also an awareness of the mission, or crusade, that he might still pursue in defence of his own reputation and the moral good of his fellow Florentines. He sees this as a dangerous task, laying him open to reprisals from those historical persons whom his poetry assails.

[Canto 17](#) also displays another practical purpose, which cannot be viewed simply as fictional play, in its extended praise of Dante's principal patron, Can Grande, as an example of renewed moral promise. Few poets are less sycophantic to their patrons than Dante. But here, almost painfully, the eye of the storyteller and poet leaves his own text, to locate itself in history and continue to secure favour.

[Canto 17](#) is, however, as much concerned with poetics as it is with biography and moral crusade. The last phase of the canto, running from [line 124](#) to the conclusion, provides an invaluable point of reference for those critics who wish to emphasize the vernacular idiomatic force of Dante's poetry, its positively aggressive pursuit of moral purpose (as against any retreat into an aesthetic ivory tower), and its desire (encouraged by Dante's Christian commitment to the Incarnation) to enter into history and effect some political change. Dante's purpose – on the evidence of these forthright lines – is to make the reader 'scratch', and to offer bitter, if ultimately wholesome nourishment. This position is supported by an implicit consideration, running through the Cacciaguida episode but reaching its climax here, in the relative functions of Latin and the Italian vernacular. This has been a matter of major concern to Dante since his early theoretical writings on language in the *Convivio* and *De Vulgari Eloquentia*. (See introduction to *Inferno*, pp. xxxiii–xlii and lxxxv–lxxxvi; also commentary on *Purgatorio* 26.) This interest is also reflected in his extended depiction of his relationship with the poet Virgil in the course of the first two *cantiche* of the *Commedia*. In the *Paradiso* Dante is shortly to return to the questions that the fate of Virgil, as a virtuous pagan, have always aroused in his mind. Essentially, while acknowledging the value of Latin as a learned language, throughout the *Commedia* the poet has maintained that the vernacular can be considered superior in its ability to deal directly with specific political issues and with questions that most radically concern the salvation of the individual. Thus, *Paradiso* 15, Cacciaguida initially addresses Dante in Latin but is obliged to descend towards the 'target' of Dante's limited intellect. In [canto 17](#) it becomes clear that in two particular ways Dante, while acknowledging that Latin and classical culture can nourish the achievement of any vernacular poet, wishes to re-assert and develop the implications of his earlier position in *De Vulgari Eloquentia*.

The two classical references, at [lines 1–3](#) and [lines 46–8](#) are indicative of this. In the first reference Dante compares himself to Phaeton (supposedly the

son of Apollo and Clymene) who, when told that Apollo is not his father, seeks definite knowledge of his paternity and subsequently exploits Apollo's indulgence to wreak havoc with his misguided adventure in the chariot of the sun – and thus makes fathers 'chary' of their sons. (See Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1: 748–56.) In the second, Dante alludes to the story of Hippolytus, who was driven out of Athens by the accusations of his stepmother, Phaedra. (See Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 15: 493–503.) In both cases, the comparisons intensify the tragic picture that Dante has been painting in the previous canto in the sequence of disturbed lines on family descent and unjust exile, while also raising a series of anxieties and questions: Is Dante in his ascent to the heavens as foolhardy as Phaeton was? Is Florence, after all, no more than a wicked stepmother to Dante? At the same time, these pagan analogies are self-evidently incompatible with Dante's own situation as a Christian. His journey is providentially assured, while Beatrice embodies the best that Florence can produce, and so deserves as much devotion as Hippolytus might have offered (but did not) to Phaedra. The classical repertoire of stories and motifs is available for Dante's use on the understanding that these imaginative resources can be 'converted' to Dante's specifically Christian purpose. (Compare commentary to *Paradiso* 8.)

Much the same (though with greater complication) applies to Dante's use of Virgil in the *Commedia*. Reference to the journey on which Virgil has led Dante is made at [lines 112–14](#), but significantly Virgil, who has been named at [line 19](#), is not named here. It is Beatrice's 'look' that is said to have led Dante onwards. Cacciaguida now replaces Virgil as Dante's male role model, and the differences are underlined at [lines 31–6](#): it is now possible for prophetic voices to speak, not in the oracular enigmas of ancient times, but with perfect directness and clarity, such as Dante will urge himself to use in the final phases of the canto. The difference is made possible by the supreme act of courage – Christ's acceptance of the Cross – which freed humanity from its propensity for error. Human words derive from that act the courage to participate in the unfolding of the providential story. Thus it is significant that, in the opening lines of [canto 18](#), Cacciaguida, on concluding his advice to his offspring, is shown to rejoice in his 'verbo' – Dante here using the elevated Latinate locution for 'word' which he usually reserves for references to the Logos, or Word of God.

In this perspective, Dante is invited to recognize first ([37–45](#)) that his own sufferings in the realm of chance and contingency require him to display his

own form of courage (standing ‘four-square against the blows that were to come’ – [line 24](#)), and in the second place (at [lines 124–42](#)) to put aside all semblance of lies in his words. (The cynical reader may ask how this leaves the evident fiction involved in his glorification of Cacciaguida.)

NOTES

- [31](#) The Italian word here ‘*ambage*’ – translated here as ‘enigmatic words’ – picks up the phrase used of the Sybil’s song in *Aeneid* 6: 99: ‘*Horrendas canit ambages*’ – ‘She sings her dreadful enigmas.’
- [37](#) See the connection with the ‘brief contingencies’ of which Aquinas speaks in *Paradiso* 13: 63. There is a connection to be made between an acceptance of the contingent and the wisdom that Solomon, as discussed by Aquinas, prays to be given as a ruler in the temporal sphere of existence.
- [49–54](#) Another anti-papal polemic – Rome is where Christ is bought and sold. Vengeance comes in the fall of the dreaded Boniface.
- [61–6](#) These lines probably refer to attempts at reconciliation made by the White Guelfs in which Dante played no part. Dante’s sympathies with Imperial policy tended to associate him with the Ghibelline cause, although his interest lay in the theory of Empire rather than practical politics.
- [70–72](#) The Scaligeri arms were a ladder surmounted by an Imperial Eagle. Can Grande della Scala was lord of Verona from 1312, Imperial Vicar in the province of Vicenza and captain-general of the Ghibelline League.
- [82–4](#) The ‘Gascon’ is Pope Clement V, who failed to support the cause of the Emperor Henry VII of Luxembourg in whom Dante had placed, prior to Henry’s death in 1313, his hopes for a revival of Imperial power in Italy. See *Purgatorio* 6 and 7 and *Paradiso* 30: 133–48.

CANTOS 18 and 19

Rising from the Heaven of Mars to the Heaven of Jupiter, Dante encounters the souls of the just, who form themselves before his eyes in the shape of a great emblematic Eagle. Dante proceeds to question the Eagle concerning the fate of the noble pagan, and

is instructed in the inscrutability of divine justice.

COMMENTARY

The opening of [canto 18](#) sees Dante wryly contrasted with Cacciaguida. Where Cacciaguida is rejoicing in the word of divine truth (registered here by the latinate ‘*verbo*’ of the Italian [18: 1](#)), Dante, thinking of what has been said, has ‘tasted’ the good news of his poetic destiny and the bad news of his exile. Beatrice returns to the scene to provide an illuminated perspective on this confusion. And against the background of her presence, the canto offers a final rollcall of examples of courage. Some of these examples (see notes below) are biblical; others, including Cacciaguida himself – who returns to his place in the cross at [18:49–51](#) – belong to the chivalric traditions of Christian knighthood instituted by Charlemagne ([18: 45](#)).

At [18: 64–9](#) Dante enters the Heaven of Jupiter, moving (as rapidly as a blush appearing then fading on a pure white cheek) from the fiery red of the sphere of Mars to the steady incandescence of the sixth sphere. From this point until the conclusion of [canto 20](#), the *Commedia* will be concerned with the virtue of justice.

Justice, for Dante, has been an issue of central importance since his first days in exile. His political writings, culminating in *De Monarchia*, offer a vision of Imperial justice which would distribute goods and honours equitably throughout the world. (See introduction to *Inferno*, pp. xxxiii–xxxvii.) Aristotelian conceptions of distributive justice as the essential principle of human society are interwoven with notions – often drawn from the Old Testament – of justice as the righteousness that any individual will seek to display in the eyes of its divine maker. The very structure of the *Commedia* offers a vision of justice in which, after death, as also at the Last Judgement, all human beings will receive the exact punishment or reward that their earthly actions have merited. In [canto 6](#) the *Paradiso* has specifically already concerned itself with the establishment of rational and comprehensible legal codes. In what ways does the present sequence express or extend those earlier considerations?

In the course of the episode, two questions of particular importance are brought sharply into focus. The first concerns the relationship of human language – as used particularly by Dante in the course of the *Commedia* – to the deliverances of divine justice. In this regard, the sequence follows on

logically from the previous cantos. Dante's mission as poet must be to promulgate justice to a wayward world, and the ambiguity of feeling that he attributes to himself at [18: 3](#) is, in part, answered by a vision of 'more than a thousand lights' ([18: 103](#)) who have lived their lives as representatives of justice. The second question concerns the ultimate fate of those who, through no fault of their own, have not had the opportunity to believe in Christ. There is an ambiguity here, too. From the moment Dante chose the pagan poet Virgil as his guide in the *Commedia*, he has circled continually around the tragic realization that Christianity, on one strict interpretation, denies salvation to those who have no knowledge of Christ. Nor is there any more explicit statement of this than at 19: 69, where Dante speaks of how frequently doubts on this score have assailed him, and finds words at [19: 76–8](#) in which to express the misgivings of those who (like him) are devoted to the achievements of non-Christian culture: Where is the justice that condemns the virtuous pagans? What fault is it of theirs if they lived, in time or space, beyond the reach of the teaching of Christ?

It is important to emphasize that in the *Commedia* Dante is striving for a progressive exploration of issues – impelled often by vigorous doubts – rather than any final authoritative statement of conclusion such as would be appropriate in a philosophical tract. In [canto 19](#), though, he summons all the resources of his philosophical poetry – clarity of word, strength of syntax, the rhythmic articulation of argument – to construct an apparently definitive response to his own question. At [19: 58–66](#), he asserts that, since all our conceptions of justice derive ultimately from God, and since God is infinite, it is contradictory to suppose that we can justly question transcendent justice: if God condemns the pagan, then that is for reasons that exceed our necessarily limited conception of justice. Yet this dictatorial conclusion, which seems to emphasize unbendingly the judgement against such figures as Virgil, is itself called into question in [canto 20](#), when, quite unexpectedly, Dante discovers that there are at least two pagans who have been promoted to Jupiter for their devotion to justice. Furthermore, despite Dante's own devotion to justice as the highest of all human virtues, [canto 20](#), at lines 94–9, finally allows that justice can be overthrown by love, submitting willingly to the higher understanding that love alone can imagine.

The shifting emphases of Dante's argument are accompanied at every point in [canto 18](#) by subtly graded differences of emotional and imaginative texture. Canto [18: 70–117](#) offers an often rhapsodic celebration of the

harmony that can exist between God and the human being in the exercise of universal justice, while its conclusion (from [18:118](#)) shifts into a bitter polemic against the Church, which confuses the operation of justice by meddling in the affairs of the world.

The configuration of souls, as Dante now imagines it, contrasts with the circularities and rectilinearities of the preceding sequences, and suggestively establishes a connection between justice and the use of signs and language. In the Romance languages ‘*lex*’ (‘law’) is etymologically connected to the act of reading – ‘*leggere*’ – as, logically, it must be, since a law which is not comprehensibly *readable* cannot be just at all. Dante has already made a similar connection in canto 6, where Justinian’s codification of Roman law is associated with an emphasis on the notion of a ‘sign’. Now Dante goes further. The souls appear to him (at [18: 88–93](#)) as letters written in the sky, forming in Latin the sentence: ‘*Diligite iustitiam qui iudicatis terram*’ (‘Love justice, you rulers of the earth’), which opens the first verse of the Wisdom of Solomon. (See Wisdom of Solomon 1: 1.) At every point Dante emphasizes the lexical and grammatical features of this act, its vowels, consonants and verbs. Then the linguistic sign transforms into a visual sign. The final ‘M’ of the sentence, when written in cursive Gothic script, reveals the shape, firstly, of an heraldic lily ([18: 113](#)). This is then subsumed into the form of the Eagle which will henceforth act as the spokesman of justice in the episode.

There is a directly political significance in this, implying that Florence (which takes the lily as its emblem) will be most fully at one with justice when it is gathered up into the Imperial order, represented by the Eagle. (Compare *Paradiso* 6 and *Purgatorio* 6: 76–151.) But there are wider implications than this. Firstly, in quoting Solomon, who appeared in the Heaven of the Sun as the greatest representative of wisdom – defined as an understanding of divinely created order – Dante here associates justice with the very structure of creation itself. Divine justice is not primarily a matter of restriction or *diktat*, but of liberated existence in which the initial act of creation ascribes to all things their appropriately sanctioned place in the scheme of the universe, and upholds those proportions and distributions that the eye of the philosopher reveals to view. It is for this reason that at [18: 73–8](#) Dante compares the souls of the just to birds flying in search of food. This is the first of several ornithological references in this sequence, all implying that, within the great formal structure of the emblematic Eagle, all ranks of lesser forms of life are, rightly, assured the proper pursuit of their own

existence. But in this, too, lies the confidence that Dante lacked at the end of his encounter with Cacciaguida. For the justice that he wishes to impart in writing his poem is supported by the whole order of creation. Dante is well aware of – and, as an exile, has suffered from – the deformations of justice which occur when victorious parties use law as an instrument to outlaw their enemies, inventing purely local regulations on partisan grounds. (See *Purgatorio* 6: 139–51). [canto 18](#) imagines a form of justice which surmounts all factionalism and associates itself with the fundamental design and purpose of the universe.

In Gerard Manley Hopkins's sonnet 'As kingfishers catch fire...', the place of human beings alongside the activities of kingfishers and dragonflies in the order of creation is seen to be the pursuit of justice: 'The just man justifies.' This, too, is Dante's point. Justice is not merely a way of regulating civil society (though it is that, too); rather it is a way of participating in a fully human existence which continues to be pursued, for the sheer pleasure of it, even in Heaven, where order has been perfectly established. In common with all the virtues, justice is an act, a practice, and not just obedience to a rule. Thus Dante as poet, here as throughout the *Paradiso*, can participate in the mode of existence that justice represents by the very act of writing – in the word play of the canto, or in his appreciation of a sign which at 18: 94–6 shines out in golden marks on the silvery page of the Heaven of Jupiter. This is directly contrasted at [18: 100–102](#) with the merely ambiguous understanding available to pagan minds which once drew auguries from the observation of the sparks sent out by burning logs. (The reference recalls Cacciaguida's ability to transcend the 'enigmatic words' (*Paradiso* 17: 31) of ancient oracles, and also looks forward to the treatment of pagan culture in [canto 19](#).)

But the converse of Dante's hitherto enthusiastic vision is anger at those who obscure or corrupt that understanding. So, at [18: 117–23](#), Dante pictures the anger of Christ as he drives the moneylenders and merchants out of the temple. Christ is both the Wisdom of God and the judge of the world. To participate in divine justice is to associate with this animating energy, as Dante now does in a scathingly satirical attack ([18: 130–36](#)) on popes such as John XXII (1249 – 1334), who slyly pervert the words of Scripture. John may indeed follow Saint John the Baptist and know nothing of his predecessor, Saint Peter, but only in the sense that he is avariciously devoted to the Florentine coinage, issued under the mark of the city's patron saint, Saint

John, and patently disregards the example of the apostolic fishermen.

Where the Cacciaguida cantos are marked at every point with the names of Florentine personages and families, the Jupiter cantos identify no individuals at all, at least until the startling revelations of [canto 20](#). This is consistent with Dante's vision of justice as an expression, and defence, of the communal unity that can be achieved by the universal exercise of reason. However, Dante's conception of justice does not require that individuals be submerged, anonymously, in global uniformity. On the contrary, justice for Dante involves a constant dialectic between the universal, the local (as in the just city) and the individual, where each participant is checked by and harmonizes with the other two. Thus, at [19:10–12](#) Dante (continuing to emphasize a connection between justice and articulate discourse) notes that, where we should have expected the Justice Eagle, as a composite body, to employ plural forms of the pronoun, in fact it speaks in the first person singular. The 'grammar' of justice, on this view, enhances and magnifies the voice of the particular beings that conform to its patterns.

The full implications of this position are worked through in [canto 20](#). But the specific function of [canto 19](#) is to address the question of whether it is just that the noble pagan should be deprived of eternal beatitude. This, as we have seen before, is a matter of the deepest importance to Dante, and, in relation to the fate of Virgil, has regularly produced in the course of the *Commedia* episodes that threaten to subvert the consistency and cohesion of the poem's intellectual architecture. In relation specifically to the theme of justice, the question potentially opens a fissure that goes to the heart of Dante's philosophy and theology. On the one hand, Dante profoundly believes in the unity of human thought, through all time and space. On the other hand, believing, with equal intensity, that Christ is incarnate at a *particular* time and place, he is bound also to believe that the coming of Christ significantly divides humanity into those who can and those who cannot believe in Christ.

The answer that the Eagle gives is at first sight authoritarian. Ultimate justice is linked to the creative, infinite and ultimately incomprehensible act by which God first wielded his 'compass' ([19: 40–45](#)) to form out of nothing a world of determinate and finite beings. Such beings exist because of, and depend upon, the perfect geometry of this creation, and through this geometry God's purposes are indeed legible to the rational mind. But God remains, as an infinite being, in 'excess' ([19: 45](#)) of all finite creation. We may have

comprehensible conceptions of justice, but these derive from depths we cannot comprehend ([19: 58–63](#)). Consequently, it is a condition of every act of human justice that it should be founded upon a just recognition of God's existential infinity. All conceptions of justice ultimately derive from God, and therefore to question God's justice – even in condemning the noble pagan – is self-contradictory, since we should have no conception of justice at all if God had not initially instilled it into us. This is the contradiction into which Satan fell, when, failing to realize his position as a finite creature (albeit the highest in all Creation), he sought prematurely to receive more light than he had been given. Even though out of an infinity of light he would progressively have received more and yet more understanding. Satan's sin is as much that of impatience as one of pride ([19: 46–8](#)).

In providing this clear and unambiguous answer, throughout [canto 19](#) the Eagle stands unwaveringly before Dante's eyes – whereas in [canto 18](#), as subsequently in [canto 20](#), the emphasis falls upon the fluidity and variety of its movements. Existential justice makes the variety of the world possible. Thus the answer that the Eagle provides unrolls in particularly measured and stable syntax, building its grammar around the understanding of the logical laws that derive from the divine geometry, and offering an account which should be compared with the account of the created order in [canto 13](#) and of Creation itself in [canto 29](#). Clear-cut answers are a necessary if meagre guide to our dealings with others, including God. Thus, momentarily at least, the Eagle assumes an emblematic, stable form. Yet this form is also compared to that of a hunting falcon ([19: 34–9](#)), and while we can take delight in the precise observation of the behaviour of the falcon, we are also reminded that the falcon is frequently, for Dante, a metaphor for the intellect seeking the highest truth. (Compare *Purgatorio* 9: 16, 14: 148–50 and 19: 64–6.) It is not the function of the Eagle here simply to provide an answer, but also to justify and promote a continuing question. In fact, the question of the noble pagan is not put in the mouth of Dante, as if it were a rebellious assault upon the dictates of the divine, but is voiced by the Eagle itself, as if it could be framed in clear and legitimate terms – questions as much as sentences being part of appropriate legal process. Moreover, in deference to divine transcendence, the concluding phase of the canto from 19: 102 focuses exclusively on questions which will remain unanswered until God's justice is finally revealed in the Last Judgement. It must be true, on any logic we derive from the Incarnation of Christ, that the wholeness of humanity depends upon an

acknowledgement of Christ rather than upon any human construction of justice. None the less, the mere utterance of Christ's name is not a guarantee of salvation ([19: 106–8](#)). Indeed, the pagan Ethiopian ([19: 109–14](#)) may well stand in judgement on those who offer merely verbal assent to Christianity. No definitive conclusion can be drawn from this, save a renewed emphasis on the transcendence of God's justice and a demand that all conceptions of human justice should be referred to the Scriptural understanding of Christ ([19: 82–4](#)). (Compare *Paradiso* 20: 134–5.) But, in contrast to the clear grammatical logic of 19: 39–90, the canto returns to that enigmatic language in which Dante frequently expresses his hopes for a just resolution to the present injustices of the world. (Compare *Inferno* 1: 100–102; *Purgatorio* 33: 43.) From 19: 115, the poet develops an acrostic on the letters L, U, E, which spell out the word meaning 'pestilence' in Italian, while each *terzina* alludes to events in contemporary history from Norway to Sicily which demonstrate how far the world is contaminated by injustice. (See notes below.) Cutting across the sequences of history (and of coherent syntax), the acrostic attempts to record the as-yet-hidden judgement already written in the divine book, as if its vertical axis could represent that interruption of all temporal (or 'horizontal') sequence which will come with God's final judgement.

NOTES TO CANTO 18

[37–48](#) After the death of Moses, Joshua led the Israelites through the wilderness to the Promised Land (Deuteronomy 1: 38). (Compare *Paradiso* 9: 124–5.) In the second century before Christ, Judas Maccabeus liberated Israel from the tyranny of Syria (Maccabees 2: 66–9: 22). Charlemagne, king of the Franks, was crowned as the first emperor of the Holy Roman Empire in Rome on Christmas Day 800. He was canonized in 1165 for his defence of Christendom against the Longobards and the Moors. (Compare *Paradiso* 6: 96.) Roland, one of Charlemagne's twelve paladins (and thought to be his nephew), is the hero of the eleventh-century French epic poem *Chanson de Roland*, which recounts his heroic defeat and death in fighting a rearguard action against the Moors at Roncesvalles in 778. William, duke of Orange (who died as a monk in 812) and his brother-in-law Reynald (or Renoart—he was a Saracen converted to Christianity) also fought against the Moors and are celebrated in the French *chansons de geste* ('songs of heroic deeds'). (Reynald is

probably a fictional character whom Dante took to be historical.) Duke Godfrey of Boulogne or Bouillon (1061–1100) led the First Crusade in 1096 and was crowned king of Jerusalem. Robert Guiscard (1015 – 1085) was of Norman extraction and fought against the Saracens in southern Italy and Sicily. He was count of Apulia, then duke of Apulia, Calabria and Sicily. In 1084 he saved Rome from attack by Emperor Henry IV (1050–1106) and rescued Pope Gregory VII (c. 1020–85). (Compare *Inferno* 28: 14.)

[82–4](#) The winged horse Pegasus struck Mount Helicon, the home of the Muses, with its hoof and produced the Hippocrene spring. (See Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 5: 250–93.) (For other references to the inspiration of the Muses, see *Purgatorio* 1: 7–12, and *Paradiso* 1: 13–36.)

[121–31](#) Christ's attack on the moneylenders in the temple is recorded at Matthew 21: 12–13.

[130–32](#) These lines refer to Saint Peter and Saint Paul, who both died martyr's deaths after lives spent working in the vineyard of Christ's service.

NOTES TO CANTO 19

[1–3](#) 'Frui' is the infinitive form of the Latin 'fruor': 'to enjoy or delight in', hence used here as a noun to signify 'delight'.

[115–48](#) Albert 1 of Germany (1255–1308), son of Rudolph of Hapsburg, was elected Emperor (though never crowned) in 1298 and invaded the kingdom of Bohemia in 1304. (Compare *Purgatorio* 6: 97.) Albert ruled as king of Germany from 1285 until he was assassinated on 1 May 1308. Lines 118–20 refer to Philip IV of France (1268–1314) who, after the battle of Courtrai in 1302, issued debased coinage to fund his wars against Flanders, to the detriment of the French economy (the 'Seine'). He died in a hunting accident when his horse was tripped up by a boar. Lines 121–3 refer to the wars of Edward I (1239–1307) and Edward II (1284–1327) of England against the Scots under William Wallace (c. 1270–1305) and Robert the Bruce (1274–1329), which culminated in the battle of Bannockburn in 1314. Lines 124–6 refer to Ferdinand IV of Castile and Leon (1285–1312) who, with the help of Aragon, won Gibraltar from the Saracens in 1296 but subsequently took little part in the defence of Christendom. Wenceslaus II of Bohemia (1270–1305) resisted Albert of Germany's invasions of

Bohemia, but won a reputation for lust and easy living. (See also *Purgatorio* 7: 101). At Lines 127–9, the ‘Cripple’ is Charles II of Anjou and Naples (1254 – 1309), titular king of Jerusalem, who was deeply involved in the political affairs of thirteenth-century Sicily. He is the target of Dante’s animus against the Angevins at *Purgatorio* 20: 79. Lines 130–36 refer to Frederick of Aragon (1272–1337), king of Sicily and grandson of Manfred (see *Purgatorio* 3), who deserted the Ghibelline cause after the death of the Emperor Henry VII in 1313 – hence Dante’s disapproval. (Compare *Purgatorio* 7: 119.) Frederick’s brother, James II of Aragon (1267 – 1327), surnamed ‘The Just’ by his subjects, ceded Sicily to the Angevin claimant, Charles II, on his marriage to Charles’s daughter. (Compare *Purgatorio* 7:121–3.) At line 138, the two crowns are those of Aragon and Majorca.

Lines 138–48 refer, respectively, to Diniz, king of Portugal (1261–1325), known as ‘The Farmer’ for his promotion of agricultural reform – though why Dante opposes him is not clear – and to Haakon V, king of Norway (1270–1319), whose reign was punctuated by wars against Denmark of the sort that, for Dante, characterized the divided state of Christendom. The ‘Rascian’ is Stefan Uros II Milutin, king of Old Serbian Rascia (1253– 1321), who issued a debased coinage similar in appearance to the *matapan* and *grosso* of Venice. The lament for the state of Hungary is precipitated by the dominance of the Angevin dynasty in that country from 1301 under the French monarch Philip IV, whom Dante detested. The son of Carlo Martello (see *Paradiso* 8) was confirmed as king of Hungary in 1309 by Pope Clement V, thus ensuring the continuance of misgovernment. Navarre was united with the kingdom of France in 1305 under Louis X (1289–1316). Navarre would have been ‘[b]lessed’ if the mountains between Navarre and France had proved a protection. The Cypriot towns of Nicosia and Famagosta were suffering in 1300 from misgovernment (as in later years would Hungary and Navarre) at the hand of Henry II of Lusignan (d. 1324).

CANTO 20

*Dante contemplates the souls who are found at the
eye of the Justice Eagle, who include the Trojan
Ripheus and the Roman emperor Trajan.*

[Canto 20](#) is no less concerned with the transcendent mystery of God's justice than [canto 19](#). But a radical change of perception occurs here which, while concluding the justice sequence, also introduces an emphasis which will come increasingly to dominate the last third of the *Paradiso*. For while (especially to post-Enlightenment eyes) the idea of divine mystery may well appear superstitious and inhibiting, it is also central to the practice of religious faith that mystery is seen to be a generative and creative principle, animating and sustaining the lives of those who believe in it. (See introduction, pp. xlv-xlix.) In the final phases of the *cantica*, as Dante imagines his ascent to God, he will speak progressively of faith, hope and charity as the resources on which the Christian mind must draw if it is to live with the ultimate mystery and ever more clearly imagine a universe that is not merely a machine but a communal order inspired by creative love. But already in [canto 20](#) he speaks, at [lines 94–9](#), of how, beyond the rigours of justice, there are the purposes of love, declaring (in words which significantly contrast the Latin of Empire and rule with the vernacular of erotic love poetry) how the *Regnum celorum* – the Kingdom of Heaven – allows itself to be overcome by ‘*caldo amore*’ – ‘warmth of love’. The implications of this statement are also suggested by a major shift in narrative that takes place as the canto develops. For where, hitherto, Dante's attention has fallen upon the communal endeavours of the speaking Eagle, the focus now falls, from [line 31 onwards](#), upon the particular named individuals who compose the eye of the Eagle, and who include, to Dante's astonishment ([81](#)), two figures from the pagan era, the Emperor Trajan and the Trojan hero Ripheus.

To speak of the eye of the Eagle is to suggest immediately a change in the meaning of this symbol. For the Eagle in medieval animal lore was believed (as Dante notes at [lines 31–3](#)) to be uniquely capable of looking into the sun without suffering any harm. And this capacity was also associated with the power of contemplative love, which can see directly into the truths of God. The Eagle is therefore the emblem not only of Empire but also of Saint John the Evangelist, who stands as the model of those whose love for God allows them the grace of a particularly exalted understanding. But this implies not only a new emphasis upon the virtue of contemplative charity but also upon the ultimately individual relationship that human beings are to enjoy with their Creator. A similar pattern of thought emerges in *Purgatorio* 9, when Dante dreams of the Justice Eagle only to discover, on waking, that the

actions performed by the Eagle were in fact performed by the agency of love, represented in his own particular patron, Saint Lucy, to whom he had prayed when his eyesight was failing. In a similar way, when in [canto 22](#) Dante encounters the contemplative Saint Benedict of Nursia (c. 480 – c. 547), he longs to see the face of the saint but is told that any such direct perception must be deferred until the highest heavens, when the faces of all those individuals who look directly on the face of God will be revealed to view. (See *Paradiso* 22: 58–66.) [canto 20](#) anticipates that move. Beyond the communal action of justice lies the relationship that the named individuals, who form the eye of the eagle, enjoy with God.

This group includes, at the pupil of the eye, the singer of the Holy Spirit, King David ([37–42](#)), whose psalms are, for Dante, a repeated illustration of the ways in which a poet may be inspired and sustained by God. But his own daring strategy, particularly in choosing to place the pagans Ripheus and Trajan at the eye of the Eagle, follows directly from the consideration of justice, love and particularity. The case of Trajan is not perhaps particularly surprising. Throughout the Middle Ages legend had it that the Emperor had benefited from the special prayers of Pope Gregory the Great on his behalf, and Dante had already taken Trajan as an example of humility in *Purgatorio* 10. Ripheus, however, presents a much more complex case. A figure drawn from legend, all that is known of him is derived from three lines in Virgil's *Aeneid*, which declare that Ripheus the Trojan, slain in the last battle for his homeland, was the most just of all the sons of Troy, although the gods, in allowing his death, thought otherwise – ‘*iustissimus unus qui fuit in Troia (dis aliter visum)*’ (*Aeneid* 2: 426–8). It may be said that Ripheus's passion for justice was so great that he was given special grace to see into the depths of the ocean of justice evoked in [canto 19](#). Yet this does not entirely solve the problems that the passage raises. For if Virgil can recognize that Ripheus is the most just of all men, then his judgement apparently coincides with God's. In which case, why does this not qualify Virgil himself to be saved?

The passage is comparable to others in which, when dealing with the case of the noble pagan, Dante seems deliberately to exacerbate the problem rather than apply the apparently authoritative conclusion that he articulates in [canto 19](#). (Other examples are the presence of the pagan Republican suicide Cato in *Purgatorio* 1 and the praise accorded to Virgil as a prophet of Christ in *Purgatorio* 21 and 22.) One approach to the issue might be to suggest that Dante, in a characteristically hard-headed manner, is more inclined to define

difficulties in his own theological system than to embrace any oversimplified solution. Yet, in the logic of the present sequence, there is a case to be made against Virgil which derives from the fateful terms in which he assumes the gods were inimical to Ripheus: '*dis aliter visum*': 'the gods thought otherwise'. A religious attitude is implied here, and religion, of course, is not the prerogative of the Christian mind. Yet this attitude of Virgil's not only speaks of plural gods but attributes to them an enmity which would wholly exclude any perception of the Christian God as the loving creator and sustainer of human beings. By contrast, the figures of the just realize in a solemnly repetitive litany – 'And now... And here he knows (46–66) – the extent of God's redemptive intentions.

In the end, however, the question posed by [canto 20](#) concerns not simply a matter of judgement as to who will be saved and who will not, but rather one of the attitudes and mentalities that are required if we are to live with the charity of the Creator. As a matter of theological argument, it would have been perfectly possible for Dante to propose, as some contemporary theologians did, that redemptive grace was implicitly available even to the pagans. On such an account, the surprise reserved for [canto 20](#) might have been to find Virgil himself in the position accorded to Ripheus. Yet (apart from the easy sentimentality of such a solution) the implications of Dante's position are quite different. For, on reaching a point in the poem where love rather than justice is to be the dominant principle, we also reach a stage where the need to establish the general rules of justice must yield before a practice of love, where the evidence of God's action is to be discerned in the lives of those particular individuals whom he has created and redeemed. In a striking conclusion to its speech, the Eagle now insists ([133–8](#)) that all mortals must be very restrained in passing judgements, since even the souls in Heaven do not yet know who will be saved. This could be taken to imply (reversing the judgement against hypocritical Christians at the conclusion of *Paradiso* 19) that the pagans may, after all, be brought to salvation. Yet that is not really the point. Rather, the words of the Eagle here denote that the time for judgement has now passed – a remarkable admission on the part of Dante, who as the architect of the *Commedia* has built his work around the distribution of penalties and rewards.

None of this should imply that justice is anything less than a universal principle. It is, however, to claim that here (and at other similar moments) Dante recognizes in the human mind a capacity to view the issues before it

under different perspectives, and to know how it is possible to change mental gear. We should, for instance, view a medical emergency as a call for practical action. Yet that same emergency may later be represented in the form of a drama which can tell us as much about the fragility or heroism of human beings in a crisis as the emergency itself revealed about the practice of first aid. Thus, the appeal of [canto 20](#), in contrast to [canto 19](#), does not reside in an engagement of rational argumentation, or in the application of rules of judgement, but rather in an exercise of heightened perception that invites us to see or hear the celebrations over the redemption of particular individuals. This canto of the Eagle's eye is suffused by images of musical and visual art (as at [lines 13–27](#) and [142–3](#)).

The experience of wonder – a concentrated response to the singular on the miraculous – has, throughout Dante's writing career, been associated with his perception of Beatrice's existence and redemption. Wonder will become, in subsequent cantos, the prevailing keynote of Dante's response to God. Within the present canto, however, two almost comic images, concluding an often sombre sequence, point us towards the ungraspable singularity of particular forms of created existence. At [lines 73–5](#), the last in the series of bird similes that punctuate the justice cantos emerges as Dante, with comic incongruity, compares the great Eagle, flying free, to a lark invisible as it soars into the sky. This simile has a history. The troubadour poet Bernard de Ventadorn (1150–95) had implied it in his famous *canson* '*Can vei la lauzeta mover...*' / 'When I see the lark beat its wings...' to express the yearnings of a lover whose heart cannot rise up with the happiness of the lark. Dante reverses the implication. The human mind can be at one, as a matter of justice, with the divine order. But this unity is posited on a yearning towards the transcendent God which itself produces the very beauty of the invisible and ultimately silent lark. Then, finally, at [lines 145–8](#), the last image of the canto is not of universal sweep but of minute perception – registered by the Italian diminutive *-etto* – as Dante sees the two lights in the brow of the Eagle – Trajan and Ripheus – flicker in harmony as eyelids might open and close. Justice, among its highest functions, will safeguard and deliver the phenomena of the world to our eyes as a source of delight.

NOTES

[37–63](#) Along with Trajan and Ripheus (see commentary above) the eye of the

Eagle contains, at its pupil, David, ‘singer of the Holy Ghost’, and king of Israel, Hezekiah, king of Judea (2 Kings 20: i–11), and the Emperor Constantine (see commentary to *Paradiso* 6 and *Inferno* 19), who moved the Empire from Rome to Byzantium – thus becoming ‘Greek’ (line 55) – and left Rome in the hands of an eventually corrupt papacy. William (line 62) is the Norman William II (1153–89), who as king of Naples (Apulia) and Sicily was renowned for his uprightness and compassion. At line 63 a contrast is drawn between the just King William and later rulers Charles of Anjou and Provence – a regular target of Dante’s odium – and the Aragonese King Frederick II. In 1300, Charles and Frederick were, respectively rulers of Naples and the kingdom of Sicily.

[94](#) The phrase ‘*Regnum celorum*’, meaning ‘the kingdom of the Heavens’ adapts the meaning of Matthew 11: 12, in which kingdom of Heaven is said to suffer the violence of violent men.

[127–9](#) This refers to the pageant of the Revelation described in *Purgatorio* 29: 121–6, in which three ladies appear symbolizing faith, hope and charity.

CANTO 21

Entering the sphere of Saturn, Dante sees a golden ladder rising to the highest heavens. He encounters the contemplatives, including Saint Peter Damian.

COMMENTARY

The last of the four planetary heavens is Saturn. In medieval lore Saturn was known as the ‘cold’ planet, and this may explain why Dante associates this sphere with the moral virtue of temperance, which involves the restraint of all appetites and emotions. Under the influence of Aristotle, Dante himself had spoken of temperance in these terms in the *Convivio* (for example, at 4: 26). But, as always in the *Commedia*, Dante – impelled by his imagination and an ever deeper understanding of Christian truth – gives a much richer and more original definition to the moral principle than is to be found in his sources. In the sphere of Saturn, spanning [cantos 21](#) and [22](#), the souls that Dante meets are all ascetics, including, in [canto 22](#), Saint Benedict, the founder of European monasticism. However, they are also contemplatives who follow

the rules of their self-denying ordinances, not for the sake of self-denial but with the purpose of sharpening their appreciation of and involvement in the life of Christian charity. The setting and imagery of the Saturn cantos emphasize the connection between temperance and contemplation: the souls here, each spinning in a concentrated circle of light, move freely up and down a ladder which is the colour of gold illuminated by rays of light and which disappears from view into the upper reaches of eternity (25–33). A source for this image is to be found in the heavenly ladder that Jacob saw, as recorded in Genesis 28: 12 (29). The most notable feature of the narrative, however, is the silence that is maintained throughout the canto. In contrast to every other heaven, the harmony of the spheres is not audible in the Heaven of Saturn (58–63). Nor does Beatrice smile in this sequence. This suggests something of the austerity and self-discipline that accompanies the ascetic life, and the control that rules tend to place over speech as to when it is appropriate and when it is not (46–7). More specifically, Dante here attributes to the souls of the contemplatives a peculiarly tense and concentrated energy which has little to do with classical conceptions of sobriety or poised self-possession. It is not that Beatrice does not smile at all. On the contrary, her smile is now so intense that if she were to show it to Dante, he would immediately be overwhelmed. So, too, temperance is not here shown to eradicate feeling or sensation but rather to render it more finely focused and more intense.

This understanding is carried further in a series of metaphors which view the monastic life in terms of essences, distillations and the grinding of wholesome grain. The form of light in which the souls of the contemplatives appear – in contrast, say, to the harmonious communal dance of the Christian philosophers in [canto 10](#) – is that of rapidly spinning millstones (81), each individual concentrated on its own centre, as if to produce the very core of nutritional goodness. So, too, the ascetic diet is seen to stimulate a vivid appetite – reflected in Dante’s own sharply sensuous verses – for the simplest forms of food, sharpened by the sensuous appreciation of extreme temperatures, and for the fresh press of olive oil (115–17). Thus, in a particularly dense and linguistically surprising passage at [lines 82–7](#), Dante imagines the process and results of contemplative activity in terms of the farmyard activities of copulation, breeding and milking. The contemplation of God leads to an inwardness shared between one’s own existential light and the light which is the source of existence. But to define this unimaginable intimacy of relationship, Dante speaks of the penetration, of God’s light into

the soul and, simultaneously, of the enwombing of the soul in the light of God. In this violent yet generative union, the soul comes to envisage the 'essence' from which its own being is 'milked'.

In dramatic and psychological terms, similar tensions are discernible in the main character whom Dante depicts in this canto, Saint Peter Damian. Historically, Peter Damian was born around 1007 of poor parents, began his career as a teacher of jurisprudence in Ravenna and Faenza before becoming a Benedictine monk in 1037 and, in 1043, abbot of Fonte Avellana. He became a cardinal reluctantly ([124–6](#)) in 1057, a position which he later resigned, and died in 1072. Peter Damian's teachings (embodied in a large corpus of sermons, some 180 letters and a number of poems) resist attempts to rationalize Christian faith – a position reflected here at the important point at which Peter refuses to answer a speculative philosophical question concerning the mystery of predestination ([73–81](#)). (See also commentary on *Paradiso* 22.)

Within this canto, however, Dante's main concern is with a streak of extreme violence that lies within Peter's temperament, a repressed anger which is also (at least on Dante's view) a productive instrument, culminating in polemic against those who enfeeble the energies of the contemplative life. Peter Damian's acerbity is immediately apparent in his own writings, such as his diatribes against the corruption of the clergy, as in the *Gomorrhianus* (a treatise against sodomy), or, for example, in the following lines from *Epistle* 48, written in 1057 on his elevation to the position of cardinal bishop of Ostia:

The office of bishop does not consist in peaked caps of sable or of some other wild beast from overseas, not in blazing red garments topped by collars of marten fur, not in flowing gold coverlets as ornamentation for their horses, and finally, not in the prancing lines of massed knights, nor in neighing horses champing at their spuming bits, but in uprightness of life and the practice of virtue.

These lines – with their references to horses, sumptuous dress and arrogant ostentation – seem to be in Dante's mind at [lines 130–32](#). But, in a bizarre enhancement of Peter's words, Dante also identifies why such behaviour is so profoundly offensive. At [lines 133–5](#) he imagines that the robe of the corrupt cleric is so luxurious that it covers horse as well as rider – as if the two beasts were dreadfully contained within a single skin. But this is to offend precisely that vivid identity and clarity of essence that the true ascetic – in common with the contemplative millwheels of this heaven – should properly cultivate. The suggestion is confirmed by the comparison Dante draws between the contemplatives and millwheels grinding grain. (Compare the reference at

Paradiso 22: 77–8 to corrupt monks as sacks of ‘rotten flour’.) The cry of pent-up indignation that concludes the canto – more stunning because of the silence that precedes it – reinforces Dante’s vision of a contemplative vitality, abrasive, even scandalous, yet spiritually necessary.

NOTES

[4–6](#) Semele was the lover of Jupiter. Juno, jealous of her husband’s liaison, persuaded Semele to ask that she should see her lover in all his majesty as king of the gods. When her request was granted, Semele was reduced to ashes by the sight of him. (See Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 3: 253–86.)

[13–15](#) Saturn is often described as a cold, dry planet. In April 1300, at the time of Dante’s fictional journey, Saturn was located within the constellation of Leo.

[25–7](#) Saturn as father of the gods ruled Crete in the Golden Age when crime was unknown. (See commentary on *Paradiso* 22.)

[106–11](#) This geographical periphrasis (compare *Paradiso* 8 and 9) describes the Apennine range which divides Italy. Monte Catria is a mountain in that range north of Gubbio in Umbria.

[121–3](#) The exact meaning of this *terzina* has been much discussed by many critics from the earliest commentators onwards. Some readers, including Dante’s son Pietro, suggest that Peter Damian is here distinguishing himself from the Peter the Sinner, who in 1096 founded the monastery of Santa Maria in Porto near Ravenna. Others take Peter, who frequently signed his letters ‘Peter the Sinner’, to be referring to himself. This scholarly debate is unlikely ever to be decided.

[127](#) Cephas is Saint Peter. The ‘vessel’ is Saint Paul.

CANTO 22

*Still in the sphere of Saturn with the contemplatives,
Dante meets Saint Benedict, who speaks of the
Benedictine Order that he founded and its decline in
modern times. Dante ascends the ladder to the sphere
of the Fixed Stars or Constellations.*

COMMENTARY

At line 99 the souls sweep up the contemplative ladder ‘as whirlwinds do’ and Dante follows them, to the next stage of the narrative, set in the Heaven of the Fixed Stars, arriving there at the constellation of ‘the sign that follows Taurus’ ([111](#)), his birth sign, Gemini. In the preceding sequence, however, the poet provides both a thematic preparation for this and a coherent, yet in some ways surprising, conclusion to the sequence of thirteen cantos that began in the Heaven of the Sun. In particular, the two cantos that are set in Saturn significantly modify the conception of justice that has emerged in [cantos 18–20](#). For in mythology, as Dante recognizes at [canto 21](#), lines 25–7, Saturn, too, is associated with justice. Under the rule of Saturn there was no criminality, but rather a Golden Age of peace. Such peace, however, was secured not by the imposition of authority or law – as it might be, for Dante, under the rule of a just emperor – but spontaneously, by natural disposition and untroubled consent. Saturnian justice is the expression of inward rather than public justice.

The interest that Dante showed in the previous canto in metaphors of natural essence – of milk, pressed oil and the grinding of grain – is translated in [canto 22](#) into recurrent references to the inwardness of the human heart ([51](#)) and its flowering in a form of spiritual justice ([55–7](#)). But the cultivation of this ethical essence is associated, above all, with the pursuit of an ascetic and contemplative form of life, exemplified particularly in the monastic practices established by Saint Benedict, the founder of European monasticism, who is the main protagonist of [canto 22](#). Some features reflecting *The Rule of Saint Benedict* have already appeared in the imagery of the Saturn sequence. The prevailing silence of the sequence reflects the silent concentration of monastic existence. The ‘ladder of contemplation’ is also a

motif in Benedictine literature. Chapter 7 of *The Rule* speaks of the ladder as a symbol of ‘our life in this world... The sides of this ladder are our body and soul, into which sides our divine vocation has fitted various degrees of humility and discipline.’ At the same time, in developing his interest in justice, Dante appears to have derived from Saint Benedict’s writing and example a powerful model of communal order in which the ‘heart’ of each member of that order might be fruitfully reconciled with the demands and spiritual interests of every other member.

Benedict was born in the Umbrian town of Nursia and educated in Rome at a time when Rome was in the throes of its imperial decline and fall. Fleeing the city at the age of fourteen to become a hermit, Benedict later established a community of twelve fellow hermits (deciding initially on the apostolic number) which eventually became the monastic community of Monte Cassino. As against the isolation cultivated by many hermits of the period, Benedict was moved by the conviction that the contemplative life is best pursued in an orderly society, with its own clear, comprehensible and mutually beneficial rules of conduct. This is particularly evident in the role he ascribed to the abbot of a monastery. Ideally at least, the abbot is required ‘to profit his brethren rather than to preside over them’ (*The Rule of Saint Benedict*, chapter 64) – to rule, that is, not by power and coercion but rather by concern and attention to the needs and characteristics of those who are set under him. Conversely, monastic obedience should involve no merely passive submission to the abbot, but rather an appreciation of the order – indeed, the justice – on which depends the harmonious pursuit of the religious life in each of its adherents. The abbot should thus be more like an orchestral conductor than a disciplinarian headmaster. Indeed, this is literally true. Under *The Rule*, provision is made for various kinds of productive work – some of it physical. But the main work of the monastery is the ‘*Opus Dei*’, the liturgical performance of prayer and hymn pursued daily in the communal singing of the canonical hours from dawn to dusk (*The Rule of Saint Benedict*, chapter 5).

A spirit of humane moderation is present throughout *The Rule* (contrasting with some of the excesses in spiritual self-denial that had come to characterize certain earlier forms of ascetic practice). The prologue to *The Rules* thus speaks of an institution in which nothing should be ‘harsh and burdensome’. This civilized tolerance may explain the immediate popularity of Benedictine spirituality and the rapid growth of the order. It is also

consistent with the response that Dante makes in [canto 22](#). At [lines 49–51](#), in three deliberately austere but beautifully balanced verses, Dante emphasizes the inwardness (*‘dentro ai chiostri’* / *‘within the cloister’*) of the monastic community – which is now replicated in the Heaven of Saturn. The intimate use of proper names indicates the recognition accorded to person and identity within the order. And the moderation of [line 51](#) speaks of the poise and steadiness that the ‘heart’ achieves when the ‘foot’ comes to rest and ceases to dissipate its best efforts. All of which exactly reflects the sentiments expressed in chapter 4 of *The Rule*, which speaks of the ‘stability’ offered by enclosure in the monastic community. This is the ‘workshop’ in which we shall ‘diligently execute’ all our tasks. (Compare *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, chapter 6.)

An understanding such as this is bound to have made an appeal to the exiled Dante, who on arriving in Paradise imagines himself re-entering a realm of good order which Florence had taken from him. But [canto 22](#) also suggests the political as well as psychological implications of monastic stability. Despite his unfailing concern with Imperial justice and the desirability of universal governance, Dante also recognizes – as in [cantos 15 and 16](#) – that only a small community, regulated by example and mutual recognition, can ultimately sustain and express the ethical ambitions of the human heart. The ideal city, such as Florence was in Cacciaguida’s time, is one example of this. The ‘court’ of Paradise – as, from [canto 23](#), Dante increasingly describes the third realm – is another. But the monastery on earth is a third. So it is not surprising that at [lines 37–45](#) Dante should take the monastic cell as a model of civilization, which from its earliest foundation at Monte Cassino brought order to the surrounding countryside. Conversely, the corruption of monastic virtues, which Dante attacks through the mouth of Saint Benedict at [lines 76–8](#), leads not only to the ruin of architectural monuments but also to the distortion of human identity as the monks become no more than sacks stuffed with rotten flour. A resource which is vital for the nourishment of civilized conduct is lost when the monastic orders decay. In this view, Dante anticipates the analysis offered by Cardinal Newman, who argues in *Historical Sketches*, volume 2 (1872) that, in the ruins of the Roman Emperor, the small communities founded by Saint Benedict ensured the continuance of civilized values (not least in the institution of libraries, which figures in Saint Benedict’s *Rule* at chapter 10). Similarly, Dante’s account is at one with the recent writings of Alasdair MacIntyre (*After Virtue*

(London, 1981)), who, on surveying the collapse of systematic ethical principles in the modern world, concludes, with direct reference to Saint Benedict, that the temporary alternative to universal schemes of justice and morality must be the small 'cell' where individual can speak to individual and thus begin to reconstruct a common understanding of ethical and spiritual values.

The Saturn cantos, then, significantly modify the notions of justice that emerged in the Heaven of Jupiter. But in his new emphasis upon the justice of the heart, Dante also prepares for a development that will take place in the last third of the *Paradiso*, where his attention will fall less upon the general than upon the particular, upon the integrity of persons rather than the promulgation of laws, upon witness rather than argument. All of this is in preparation for the final meeting between Dante and God in [canto 33](#), which will be a face-to-face encounter where all general principles dissolve in the experience of the singular.

Two important passages in the Saturn sequences anticipate this development. The first is *Paradiso* 21: 73–99, where Dante puts to Peter Damian a question concerning the effects of predestination. This is the sort of question that Dante has pursued repeatedly throughout the *Commedia*. But now it seems the time for such discussion is over. Brusquely, Damian refuses to answer, and demands that Dante should tell the world of how presumptuous such curiosity as this must always be. But an alternative to philosophical inquiry is offered here, which is that Dante should 'very humbly' ask the name of his interlocutor (*canto* 2.1, line 105). To this question he does receive an answer, and, where conceptual inquiry has proved inappropriate, named persons begin to speak. Similarly, at [lines 58–63](#), Dante – now responsive to Peter Damian's strictures – asks of Saint Benedict simply that he should be allowed to see the saint's features, free of the dazzling light that surrounds them. This does show a proper interest in the person, yet Dante is again denied. In this case the reason is that the privilege is so great – of seeing the human face as it truly is – that it can only be granted in the Empyrean, where Dante will see the saints assembled in the presence of God.

[Canto 23](#) will take further the interest that Dante shows here in the identity of the named individual. But in [canto 22](#) the final emphasis ([105–123](#)) falls upon his own person, as he rises to the constellation of Gemini ([152](#)) under whose astral influence he was born, in the later part of May 1365. This

passage can seem surprising in the acceptance it displays of the theory of astrological influence, and might easily be thought to promote a deterministic view of human character at odds with Dante's unfailing insistence on the freedom of the will. Yet at every point since *Purgatorio* 17, where Dante most fully discusses the freedom of the will, true freedom resides not in some impossible state of autonomy, but in a conscious alignment of the will with the existence which it has been providentially given at the moment of its creation. In this perspective, it is not deterministic for Dante to say that his specific identity and 'whatever talents that are mine' derive from the influence of Gemini (114). Fulfilment of his existence depends upon his willing recovery of the possibilities that were stamped upon him at the time of his birth. To arrive at Gemini is to return, by all the efforts that his journey and his poem have required, at the place from which he started. These lines represent a coming-home to the place that Dante was always meant to occupy in the universal scheme. It is some indication of how Gemini may be the true home which Florence has failed to be that 'vosco' (meaning 'with you') should at line 117 rhyme with 'tosco' ('Tuscan') as if the Tuscan air were always potentially toxic, 'tosco' also being Italian for 'venomous'.

The ethical subtlety of this passage produces a particular subtlety of poetic tone. On a cursory view, Dante's vision of the world as an insignificant item in the grand perspective of the universe (133–5) might be mistaken as a contemptuous expression of ascetic detachment from all worldly attractions. And this impression might seem to be re-inforced by the fact that the source for this passage is undoubtedly Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis* 3, which speaks, with relief, of man's power to transcend his earthly origins. Yet Dante's passage is quite different in its tone. There is nothing here of the violence and disparagement that characterized the polemics of Saints Peter Damian and Benedict. Nor is there any of Cicero's dignified other-worldliness. Dante's vision is Christian, not classical, and is characterized by a smile (135) of ironic acceptance rather than the laughter of derision. Lines 139–53 celebrate in ornate mythological terms the circling of the heavens through which Dante has now passed. But in line 153 he returns to the simple detail of the earth with something of the frisson that earlier accompanied his reference to oil, water and roses, and he notes with a clear eye – simultaneously ascetic and aesthetic – the rivers that run around the globe from hills to estuaries.

[49](#) ‘Maccario’ – meaning the ‘blessed’ or ‘sainted’ – was a fairly common name, but here Dante probably means Maccarius the Younger of Alexandria (d. 404), who founded the traditions of monasticism in the East as Bernard did in the West. Romoaldus (c. 950–1027) founded a reformed and especially ascetic order based on Saint Benedict’s *Rule*. Peter Damian belonged to this order and wrote a life of its founder. Romoaldus may have contributed to the idea of the ladder of contemplation through a vision recorded in the *Breviarium Romanum* (c. 1020).

[94–7](#) These lines refer to the miraculous actions of God in which the Jordan is said to have turned back against its regular course (Psalm 114: 3 and Joshua 3: 13) and the Red Sea parted as the Israelites fled from Egypt (Exodus 14: 21–2). However, even such events are less extreme than the corruption of the modern monastic orders.

[139–41](#) The ‘daughter of Latona’ is the moon. The dark patches on the moon can only be observed on the side nearest the earth. (See *Paradiso* 2.)

[142–53](#) These lines review the heavens surrounding the earth through which Dante has passed to arrive at the Fixed Stars. The son of Hyperion (see Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 4: 142 and 192) is the sun, Mercury is the child of Maia and Venus of Dione. Jupiter, standing between his son Mars and his father Saturn, moderates the two extremes that these represent of heat and cold.

CANTO 23

Dante momentarily sees Christ, along with all the members of the Church Triumphant. When this vision has passed, his attention falls upon the Virgin Mary, who is surrounded by saints, including Saint Peter, who will examine Dante’s faith in [canto 24](#).

COMMENTARY

[Canto 23](#) begins a new phase of the *Paradiso*. Having described his ascent to the Fixed Stars in the previous canto, Dante now momentarily anticipates the final cantos of the poem when, at [lines 19–21](#), he experiences a vision of Christ in triumph surrounded by all the souls of the Church Triumphant in Heaven, who will finally be seen, face to face, in the Empyrean. For the

moment, however, this vision remains indescribable. Dante is still a member of the Church Militant on earth. In *Paradiso* 24–6, he will be examined in the three virtues – faith, hope and charity – which will eventually lead him to a full participation in the Christian life. But in [canto 23](#) he is concerned to imagine a world-in-waiting, summoning its resources in preparation for the coming of Christ himself.

From first to last, [canto 23](#) is a celebration of those God-bearing images which stand before us at one remove from the transcendent truth of God but are sanctioned, none the less, to carry God's meaning to us. Supreme among these is the figure of the Virgin Mary, who chose to accept the responsibility of 'bearing' Christ, and who is sometimes described as the first and most perfect of Christians. Dante will pray to her at the opening of [canto 33](#). Here he speaks of how in life his devotion to the Virgin shapes his temporal existence. She is described at [lines 88–9](#) as 'that lovely flower which I, / at dawn and evening, call upon', and in the second phase of this canto she is depicted as the ruler of the court of Heaven, the visible manifestation of God's intention assembled here to encourage Dante in his ascent.

But she is not alone. The canto is in fact at all points marked by reference to analogous and consistently feminine presences. Beatrice is one, acting so as to point out Christ in the early part of the canto. [At lines 22–59](#), her smile evokes from Dante the most extended and elaborate confession of poetic inexpressibility that the *cantica* contains. (For a full discussion of this, see introduction, pp. liv–lviii.). But the implications of her presence here, alongside the Virgin Mary, are matched in two very complex similes, the first at [lines 1–9](#), the second [at lines 25–30](#). The first compares Beatrice, as she waits for the coming of Christ, to a mother bird (another God-bearing image) displaying on the level of instinctual desire that appetite for existence and the same concern to sustain the existence of others which inspires the created world on all its levels. The simile has its origins in a poem by Guido Guinizzelli (c. 1230–76). (See commentary on *Purgatorio* 26.) In '*Al cor gentil rempara setnpres amore...*' ('Love always returns to the noble heart...') Guinizzelli compares the relationship of love and nobility to a bird nestling in green foliage. This is in turn a motif that goes back to, and modifies, Occitan lyrics such as those of Bernard de Ventadorn (see commentary on *Paradiso* 20) who sadly contrasts his own melancholia with the soaring song of a lark. In his early career Dante had spoken of Guinizzelli's poem as the forerunner of the 'sweet new style'. (See

Purgatorio 26.) The present use of that poem displays the extent to which his philosophy of love has developed to involve notions of creative charity and to envisage, in complete contrast to Bernard de Ventadorn, happiness as the underlying condition of all existing things.

Equally, the passage registers the poetic developments that have taken place between Dante and his predecessors. One such advance lies in the graphic and detailed realism of the passage: a bird on the very tip of a quivering bough, the looks on the faces of its offspring. Another lies in the complex syntax of the passage, along with a delicacy of rhythm and enjambment, which is sustained in a manner far beyond what Dante could have managed in his own early writing. Some of these developments might be due to the influence of Virgil, to whom Dante alludes in his reference to the foraging of the bird. (Compare [line 5](#) with *Aeneid* 12: 475.)

In the second half of the canto, representing the court of the Virgin Mary, Dante clearly alludes to the medieval traditions of the Courtly Garden of Love, which could be an allegorical figure for the erotic life or a place in which lovers might gather to debate their experience of love. The heavenly garden that Dante describes is a place of chivalric display and courtesy ([100–111](#)), now magnified to celebrate the finesse and delicacy of the divinely created world. At the same time, it is a Roman court ([136–9](#)) in which justice is triumphantly announced and the reconciliation of the human and divine brought into new focus. This conflation of the lyrical traditions of vernacular poetry and the epic traditions of classical times extends to the fine detail of the text, in its choice of word and image, and carries with it a claim, on Dante's part, to a new possibility – that of writing theological poetry. [Lines 55–69](#) contain confident allusions to classical mythology, including to Polyhymnia, the Muse of sacred poetry ([55–7](#)). But Dante's 'sacred' poem has its own unique stamp in concerning itself, above all, with the manifestations of divine love as it appears in the detail of the human and natural world. And the poetry of this canto is uniquely concentrated upon the visual and even sensuous suggestions that are generated by this world. At [lines 25–30](#), there is, for instance, an oxymoronic play on contrasting temperatures: Christ, 'one sun' burning among his lesser lights, is described in terms of the moon among the cool night-time stars. The same passage even allows a certain note of menace and witchcraft to enter, in its reference to the tri-form goddess of the moon, Diana or Artemis, who is also the goddess of hunting and death. In contrast to this sinister evocation, the second half of the

canto is marked by references to the forces that display themselves powerfully but beautifully in the natural world, to thunderbolts ([40–42](#)) and to rays of sunlight striking through broken clouds ([79–81](#)).

It is ironic (but wholly characteristic of Dante) that a canto which is concerned with Christ's triumph and reflects so brilliantly the poet's own triumphal virtuosity should also centre on one of his most elaborate confessions of poetic inadequacy, as he attempts to describe ([55–66](#)) the indescribable effect on him of Beatrice's smile. There is even a certain comedy in the passage's linguistic shifts as the diction moves from the evocation of the Muses – enriched by Latinate diction such as 'pingue' ([57](#)) and 'mero' ([60](#)), meaning 'pure' and 'abundantly rich' – to lines that evoke the humdrum trembling of shoulders ([65–6](#)) and paths lost on a journey ([63](#)). But such humility – comparable in poetic terms to the moral humility displayed by the Virgin Mary and by Beatrice – is always fundamental to Dante's conception of his own role as a sacred poet. (See introduction, pp. lvi–lviii and commentary on *Paradiso* 33.)

A corresponding change now takes place in Dante's representation of himself as a character, which leads, in the coming cantos, to a progressive exploration of what humility means in ethical as well as poetic terms. From now on, Dante as a character will be the main focus of attention as the poem depicts his examination in the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity as part of his entering the court of Heaven in [canto 23](#). For, properly conceived, a court is a place in which the merits of each individual are properly recognized and celebrated by all its members. (For Dante's view of how disastrously far from this ideal the courts of the world can fall, see *Purgatorio* 14.) As when the Virgin Mary agrees to participate in the working of providence, so too humility, rather than self-assertion, is the qualification for entry to this court. And it is the productive power of humility – along with the assurances it secures for the recognition of individual identity – that are supported and developed by the theological virtues.

NOTES

[10–12](#) In the middle of the sky, the sun seems to move more slowly than it does near the horizon.

[25–7](#) Dante's Italian speaks here of 'Trivia'. This is one of the names of Artemis (otherwise Diana), who is 'tri-form' in that she is the goddess of

the moon, of the hunt and of death. The moon here is seen among a vista of stars – the ‘eternal nymphs’.

[37](#) Christ, in the phrase of Saint Paul (1 Corinthians 1: 24), is the ‘power of God, and the wisdom of God’.

[73–5](#) In traditional iconography, the Virgin Mary is the ‘rose’. The lilies or *fleurs de lys* are the saints of the Church.

[106–14](#) The allusions here are to the plan of the Ptolomaic universe. Beyond the Fixed Stars there is the *Primum Mobile* (here referred to as the ‘regal surcoat’) which Dante enters in *Paradiso* 29. The Empyrean is the supreme sphere, the eternal presence of God, where Dante arrives in *Paradiso* 30.

[127–9](#) ‘*Regina coeli*’ – ‘Queen of Heaven’ – is one of the liturgical hymns to the Virgin Mary, particularly associated with Eastertide. (Compare *Purgatorio* 7: 82.)

[133–5](#) Life on earth is compared here to the exile in Babylon suffered by the Jews. (Compare Jeremiah 52.)

[139](#) This refers to Saint Peter holding the keys of the Church. He will be the main speaker in the following canto.

CANTO 24

Saint Peter examines Dante in the virtue of Christian faith.

COMMENTARY

[Canto 24](#) is the first of three cantos that deal in turn with the three theological virtues of faith, hope and charity. These virtues are to be distinguished from the four cardinal virtues – wisdom, courage, justice and temperance – to which Dante gave his attention in [cantos 10–20](#). Thomas Aquinas provides a definition both of the difference between theological and cardinal virtues and of the theological virtues themselves:

When a man is admitted to citizenship, he should have the virtues ensuring that he loves and serves the State. Likewise, when by divine grace a man is set on sharing eternal bliss, which consists in the joyful vision of God, he becomes a citizen and a companion in the blessed society of the Heavenly Jerusalem: *ye are... fellow-citizens, with the saints, and of the household of God* (Ephesians 2: 19). Definite virtues are required of a man thus enrolled. They are the infused virtues freely given to him, and their activity is prompted by love of the common good of that perfect society, namely the divine good which is the heart of happiness.

Disputations, De Caritat e 2

and

The theological virtues are those that make us well-adjusted to our last end, which is God himself... The theological virtues are therefore three – *faith*, which makes us know God; *hope* which makes us look forward to joining him; *charity*, which makes us his friends.

Disputations, *De Virtutibus in communi* 12

The account offered in the *Paradiso* is broadly consistent with the position that Aquinas articulates. However, as one would expect, the particular emphases in these cantos reflect Dante's independence of mind as well as his own experiences.

Dante's treatment of faith in [canto 24](#) as 'that which makes us know God' has been discussed in the introduction, pp. xxxii–xxxviii. Here, as the focus of attention falls upon Dante as character, the poet also reconstructs his identity around the central truths of his Christian faith – in a way that is comparable to the reconstruction of his Florentine ancestry in *Paradiso* 15–17. The guiding metaphor of the narrative is that of an oral examination in a medieval university, or perhaps of a graduation ceremony, since the function of the examination is not to prove but to celebrate the truths of the faith. References to ceremonial feasting open the canto ([1–6](#)). These are followed by pyrotechnic moments expressing the energy and harmony of the society into which Dante has now entered, the souls flame 'as comets do' ([12](#)) and move with the same variety and unity of purpose as wheels in a piece of clockwork ([13–15](#)).

Within this frame, Saint Peter emerges not as the vacillating and impetuous figure of the Gospels but as a dignified senatorial presence (accorded the Latinate designation of 'viro' – 'man' – at [line 34](#), rhyming with the equally Latinate 'miro' – 'wonderful' – at [line 36](#)) who is also capable of interrogating the examinee in highly sophisticated, if sometimes brusque terms. Saint Peter is also referred to at [line 59](#) in the technical terms of the Roman military, as 'primipilo' – the highest rank of centurion, here translated as 'the noblest of centurions'. Considerable tension builds up at [lines 46–51](#) as Dante – deferential but confident – silently prepares his response, answering Saint Peter's brusque opening volley ([51–2](#)), after an encouraging glance from Beatrice, with a definition of faith that draws directly on Aquinas's discussion of that virtue in the *Summa Theologiae*: 2: 2: 4: 1: 'Faith is substantial to the things we hope, the evidence of things we do not see' ([64–6](#)). However, in using scholastic terminology (rather showily), Dante has laid himself open to a demand from Saint Peter ([67–9](#)) for greater

technical precision in applying the terms *substantia* ('substance' or foundational reality) and *argumentum* ('evidence', or rational consent) which have a place not only in scholastic texts but also in the original theology of the Church. (See Hebrews 11: 1.) Saint Peter's own second epistle, at 2 Peter 3: 15, had already adopted the Pauline formulation (62). Dante shows himself again to be competent, ending his response with the claim that one may base logical arguments on the evidence of faith, creating syllogisms or 'sound arguments' on that basis (77).

At this point, however, the language of the canto becomes more metaphorical, and then more emphatically scriptural. At [lines 82–7](#) Dante exuberantly compares his possession of faith to the possession of a coin, bright and round in his pocket. The daring metaphor and rhythmic verve of this comparison diversify the intellectual concentration of the canto. They also introduce a polemical note. Florentine capitalism may depend upon the success of its coinage (a *fiduciary* token, for which Dante repeatedly expresses contempt, as, for instance, at *Paradiso* 9: 127–32). But Dante's own success is founded on the one true faith. This passage also shifts his response away from argument towards a recognition that faith is received by entry into the traditions of the Church, as represented by all those individuals, including Saint Peter, who have lived by and exemplified the faith ([97–111](#)). Saint Peter, at [lines 103–6](#), warns Dante that his arguments are tending to become circular – taking the Bible to prove what the Bible claims to prove. But Dante escapes this by looking to the history of Christian witness. The tensions between reason and faith are now overcome with an agile leap, as Dante argues, at [lines 106–8](#), for the veracity of miracles – on the grounds that if the world had been converted to Christianity without miraculous claims on the resources of faith, this would itself have been the greatest miracle of all.

In the concluding lines, Dante triumphantly re-states his own *Credo*, drawing together the whole gamut of scholastic, scriptural and metaphoric usages that [canto 24](#) has established. (See also introduction, pp. xxxii–xxxviii.)

NOTES

[13–15](#) Compare with the clock at *Paradiso* 10: 139–44.

[124–6](#) Peter, older than the rest of the disciples such as John, ran more slowly

to the tomb of Christ on the morning of the Resurrection, but was quicker to believe that Christ had risen. (See John 20: 1–9.)

[136–8](#) The last line of this *terzina* refers to the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost into the lives of the Apostles.

CANTO 25

Dante expresses his fading hopes for a return to Florence. He is then examined in the theological virtue of hope by Saint James, whose brother John appears at the conclusion.

COMMENTARY

Hope, the second theological virtue, is said by Dante at [lines 67–9](#) to be the ‘sure expectation... / of glory that will come. The grace of God / and precedent good works produce this power.’ Here he exactly reproduces in Italian the Latin phrases of the major theological text book of the period, Peter Lombard’s *Sententiae* 3: 2.6 (1145–51). He also gives particular prominence in the canto to the words of King David, the author of Psalm 9: 10, twice quoted, in Italian at [line 73](#) and in the Latin of the Vulgate (‘*Sperant in te*’) at [line 98](#): ‘And they that know thy name will put their trust in thee: for thou, Lord, hast not forsaken them’ (Authorized Version).

Dante’s interlocutor in this canto is the apostle James, brother of Saint John the Evangelist, who joins the scene at [lines 103–11](#) and, in [canto 26](#), will examine Dante in the virtue of charity. The Epistle of Saint James is referred to at [lines 76–8](#). Saint James does not speak explicitly of hope in the New Testament but rather of the rewards that will be given by God to those who suffer and who are capable, through love, of overcoming temptation (Epistle 1: 12). Dante clearly derives from these words a particular understanding of the second theological virtue, applying them to his own case.

Hope is less a matter of doctrine than of an attention to the divine, sustained throughout the journey of earthly existence. At [lines 52–4](#) Dante claims, through the mouth of Beatrice, especial adherence to this virtue. This claim goes back to chapter 40 of the *Vita nuova* where, meditating on the example of certain pilgrims whom he sees travelling through Florence, he

defines the word ‘pilgrim’ – ‘*peregrind*’ – as one who travels as a stranger far from his own land and, specifically, seeks to visit the tomb of Saint James at Compostela in Galicia. (Compare here [lines 17–18](#).) The passage, written before Dante’s exile, echoes tragically with premonitions of displacement and alienation. At the same time, hope is seen as the pilgrim virtue, sustaining the stranger in his distress and giving spiritual purpose to his labours. Dante’s hopes, after the death of Beatrice, are focused upon the hope of her resurrection. But as an exile, and in writing the *Commedia*, he also describes a pilgrimage – a journey to Beatrice, as it has been called – which is sustained by the hope of arriving, as he puts it at [lines 55–7](#), at a Heavenly Jerusalem and leaving the temptations of ‘Egypt’ – or the earthly world – behind him.

[Lines 1–9](#) movingly express the complex relationship that Dante has envisaged, from the *Vita nuova* onwards, between hope and security, estrangement and homecoming, relationships and loneliness. In these nine lines he reflects on his exile and his achievements in writing the *Commedia*, imagining the remote possibility that his poem might so impress his fellow Florentines that they might receive him back into the city and in the Baptistry – the civic as well as the religious centre of Florence – bestow on him the laurel crown of poetic victory, thus triumphantly recognizing, in a repetition of his original baptism, the name that banishment has taken from him. The passage runs parallel to the concern Dante shows in *Paradiso* 15–17 with his own poetic mission to the Florentines. But here there are only occasional moments of militant aggression, concerning the cruelty of his fellow citizens and his own enmity towards them. Overall, the passage is marked by a contemplation of remote possibilities, expressed in ‘*continga*’/‘*may* happen’; ‘*vinca*’/‘*might* overcome’, and an awareness of continuing pain (the writing of the *Commedia* has over many years made his features ‘grow gaunt’). But these are merely faint human hopes, wholly different from the virtue of hope in its theological sense which in the course of the canto Dante will now celebrate and claim to possess.

In contrast to its opening, the rest of [canto 25](#) is dominated by metaphors of secure space in which the relationships between persons are unthreatened. [Lines 28–33](#) speak, in Latinate terms, of a basilica – or regal hall – which possesses the largeness and indeed largesse that Dante associates continually with God’s creative action. (Compare *Paradiso* 5: 19.) At moments, the canto verges on the baroque in its perception of the volume and amplitude of

architectural space. Through the introductory simile of [lines 19–24](#), Dante imagines Saint James flying like a dove through the hall and settling into a triumphant princely posture, with Dante facing him as a suppliant (designated by the Latin phrase *c o r a m m e*). The spaces of the hall ‘echo’ with hope ([31](#)) as later ([98](#)) they will with the Latin words of the psalm, ‘*Sperent in te.*’

Though Dante maintains the metaphor of a university examination ([64–6](#)), the emphasis here falls less upon argumentative rigour than it did in the previous canto. Dante’s replies to Saint James are rich in metaphor: the words of Saint James and of the psalmist David fall like star light and ‘drops of dew’ into his heart ([70–78](#)). Hope is refreshment but also an ardent virtue, far from wistfulness or wishful thinking: Dante is ‘fired’ into declaring his love of hope ([82](#)); Saint James is a great conflagration ([80–81](#)) who vibrates like a lightning flash.

Next Saint John comes to join his brother in the group of inquisitors. At first he is compared gently to a woman preparing to enter a formal dance ([103–8](#)), but then reality strikes with ever increasing power and intensity. Suddenly Dante finds that he is blind, unable to see even Beatrice at his side ([130–39](#)). In the violence of this moment, so unlike the nostalgic opening of the canto, Dante suffers an estrangement even from the powers of vision that hitherto have supported him in his pilgrimage through the *Paradiso*. Hope in its fullest sense is needed not simply to guide one through earthly vicissitudes, but also through the mysteries and darknesses that the life of faith itself imposes on the human mind.

NOTES

[25–7](#) *Coram me* means ‘in my presence’.

[55–7](#) Egypt, as the land in which the Hebrews suffered servitude, is symbolic of life on earth.

[73](#) The reference is to Psalm 9: 10, *Sperent in te*: ‘And they that know thy name will put their trust in thee.’

[79–81](#) In Mark 3: 17, Jesus nicknamed James and John ‘the sons of thunder’.

[94–6](#) In Revelation 3: 5 and 7: 9–17, Saint John speaks of the ‘white raiment’ or ‘robes’ that will be worn by those elected to Heaven.

[100–102](#) For a month in the middle of winter, the constellation of Cancer shines all night through. Were this constellation to contain a star as luminous as this ‘crystal’ throughout that month, then night would be as

bright as day.

[112–14](#) The reference is to Psalm 102: 6: ‘I am like a pelican of the wilderness.’ The pelican pecks its own breast to revive its young with its blood, and is thus a symbol of Christ’s self-sacrifice. The Virgin Mary is given into Saint John’s care by Christ as he hangs on the Cross.

[121–3](#) Dante is hoping to see the body on the erroneous expectation – refuted by Saint Thomas but pushed by certain medieval theologians – that John had been directly assumed to Heaven in bodily form.

[127–9](#) The two ‘robes’ are the radiance of spirit and that of the resurrected body. Some had speculated that Elijah, Enoch and Saint John might have been assumed in bodily form into Heaven.

CANTO 26

Dante, now temporarily blinded, is examined in the virtue of charity by Saint John the Evangelist. When his eyesight returns, he encounters Adam and is told about the conditions of the Garden of Eden, in particular the language that was spoken in the Garden.

COMMENTARY

Dante represents himself as blind throughout the examination on the meaning of charity conducted by Saint John. His eyesight only begins to return at [line 79](#) as, in the second half of the canto, he finds himself face to face with the redeemed Adam. When, in the central cantos of the *Purgatorio*, Dante had offered an earlier discussion of love, he had also been deprived of sight, not by blindness but by the black smoke of repentance and the shadows of his second night on the mountain. Among other things, charity is to be understood as a capacity for contemplation and vision which, once concentrated on God, brings delight at the presence of the divine, and permits, as Aquinas puts it (in *Summa Theologiae* 2a–2ae: 231), a union or friendship with the purposes of the divine. Such contemplation does not exclude other manifestations of charity towards, for example, Adam, as the being that God first created and redeemed. It does, however, require a ‘blindness’ to the false forms of love that distract the mind. Since Dante’s

attention shifted in [canto 20](#) to the contemplative eye of the Justice Eagle, his poem has begun to hold out the possibility of an eventual union, in friendship, with divine being. On the way to that vision, he will, especially in [cantos 27–9](#), repeatedly emphasize the difference between the blindness of *caritas* and the blindness of acquisitive desire that directs our attention downwards to the things of the world.

As [canto 25](#) differs in its imaginative colour from [canto 24](#), so does [canto 26](#) from the two preceding ones. Discursive examination of the virtue of charity is limited to [lines 22–66](#). The intellect is already engaged in an exercise at the very limits of its capacities, where almost unutterable conceptions of the relationship between divine good and human good are located, and where lyrical rather than analytical rhythms are more appropriate (as, for instance, at [lines 28–33](#)). Dante's success in speaking of love is appropriately marked by the singing of the 'Sanctus' at [line 69](#) which, in the liturgy of the Mass, associates human worship with that of the angels, whose whole function (as will appear in *Paradiso* 28) is single-minded contemplation of the divine. Metaphor, too, shifts in character from the predominantly architectural sphere of [canto 25](#) – where hope seemed to be associated with the highest achievements of human civilization – to the natural sphere, with a marked emphasis ([64–6](#)) on the metaphor of the orchard. This metaphor, in part, prepares for mention of the Garden of Eden as Adam appears, but also serves to define charity as a participation in the divine purposes of creation: Dante claims that, since God loves each leaf in his orchard, so, to the utmost of his own capacities, does Dante himself.

At [lines 70–75](#), Dante describes the return of his eyesight, his gaze falling first on Beatrice and then on the surprising figure of Adam, contained in a flickering halo of light. And, with this, the tenor of the canto changes. The concentration that has marked the examination sequence dissipates into an evocation of shifting phenomena and of process. Human beings are transfigured here, and the effects of change, even of transience – which were among the consequences of the Fall – are no longer viewed as signs of fallibility but more as defining characteristics of the human being which are now reconciled once more with the order of creation. So Dante's first response to Adam, astounded as he is to find Adam there at all, is figuratively depicted at [lines 85–7](#) as that of a leafy branch, bending and fluttering at the tip as the wind blows on it, then rising up because of its inner sap and strength. This is the way that Nature is.

In the final sequence of the canto ([103–42](#)) Dante, now in harmony with the original model of human nature, is ready to ask questions, and finds that Adam understands what these are without his uttering them. Some of these questions are the obvious ones and receive an almost offhand answer. There is no need now to dwell on guilt and sin: the reason for the Fall was not the eating of the apple but the breaching of the limits God imposed ([115–17](#)). And that breach has been repaired. As to the length of time that Adam and Eve remained in Eden, this was no more than seven hours, from 6 a.m. to 1 p.m. Yet the shortness of this sojourn elicits no great comment. Surprisingly, the main topic of conversation between Dante and Adam concerns linguistics. The question raised here is one that has been of considerable importance to Dante since his treatise on language theory, the *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, concerning the attitude we should adopt to linguistic mutability. (See discussion in the introduction to *Inferno*, pp. lxxxvi–lxxxvii, and commentary on *Purgatorio* 6.) But Dante’s view has changed now. Linguistic change need not be considered a disaster, nor even as a consequence of the confusion of tongues at Babel. Language is the product of human reason, and all such products are subject to change. We speak as pleases us, and there is not even one single or magically accurate name for God. So, long before Babel, Adam’s original language had already been extinguished.

The canto ends, then, with a relaxed, if mildly melancholic, awareness of human mutability. But at [lines 97–9](#) Dante has, in miniature, displayed the consequences of a linguistic flexibility which allows the use of colloquial reference, often in unexpected circumstances. Adam, so far from being presented in unambiguously heroic terms, is first seen wriggling in his surrounding light like ‘a beast... in a sack’ (or, as some scholars have suggested, ‘like a silkworm in its cocoon’).

NOTES

[10–12](#) In Acts 9:17–18 Ananias places his hands on Saint Paul’s eyes to cure him of blindness.

[37–43](#) There is some controversy as to the authority which is referred to at line 38. Some recent commentators have argued that Dante is here alluding to the Platonic tradition, received into medieval thought particularly through the writings of Saint Augustine. Early commentators, however, cited Aristotle, or the *Liber de Causis* (supposed, in Dante’s day, to be

Aristotle's work). At line 42, Dante records God's words to Moses in Exodus 33: 19. He then alludes to the words with which his present interlocutor, Saint John, opens his Gospel, where the love of God expressed in the Trinity is announced.

[64–6](#) The 'orchardist', or gardener, is Christ. (Compare John 15: 1.)

[67–9](#) 'Holy, Holy, Holy' is the song of the Seraphim spoken of in Isaiah 6: 3, which is now sung by congregations in preparation for Mass.

[70–72](#) When Dante speaks of '*spirto*', here – as in the *Vita nuova* – he means the physical energies that activate the senses (in modern terms, something like neurons). He was influenced in this by his friend Guido Cavalcanti (see commentaries to *Inferno* 10 and *Purgatorio* 2), but he fundamentally rejected Cavalcanti's materialist explanation of mental action. (See introduction to *Inferno*, pp. xxviii–xxxli.) 118–20 It is to be remembered that, before Christ's coming, Adam was confined in Limbo, the realm of Hell in which Beatrice found Virgil. (See *Inferno* 1.) The mention of Virgil's name at this late stage in the poem is significant, especially as matters of linguistic debate are under discussion.

133–8 The reference here is to the two names for God in Hebrew Scripture, 'I' or 'Yah' being the opening of 'Yahweh', 'El' being an alternative form.

139–42 The length of time that Adam spent in the Garden of Eden before and after the Fall was seven hours, from 6 a.m., the first hour of the day, to the hour that follows noon.

CANTO 27

*Saint Peter condemns the corruption of the modern
Church. Dante and Beatrice ascend to the
Primum Mobile.*

COMMENTARY

At line 70, Dante reaches the *Primum Mobile*. This is the sphere, beyond the planets and stars, which is the swiftest of all the heavens in the universe ([99](#)), and which initiates all those motions in the spheres beneath it on which the development of life in space and time depends. In common with the quarks and neutrinos that today's scientists posit in their speculations, the *Primum Mobile*, unlike the planetary heavens, is invisible. But, from at least the time

of Aristotle, a sphere such as this was thought to be necessary to explain the workings of the material cosmos. Thus, in arriving here Dante completes his examination, according to the best science of his day, of the mechanisms by which life is sustained in space and time.

It is entirely characteristic of Dante that he should concern himself with scientific investigation of the universe, and his commitment to the legitimacy of rational inquiry is one of the most original aspects of his artistic and ethical project. Yet to the religious eye (as developed, particularly, in Judaism, Christianity and Islam) the universe is not to be regarded merely as a machine but rather as a gift or miracle, expressing the intentions of its creator towards his creatures. God created this universe wholly out of nothing but need never have created it at all. (See *Paradiso* 29: 13–21 and introduction, pp. xxxviii–xli.) There can, therefore, never be any scientific or merely logical way – through the analysis of, say, cause and effect – of arriving at a definition of God (though even Aristotle thinks it reasonable to argue that God exists). God always stands above and beyond the universe he created. None the less, in accepting the gift and participating in the unfolding of created existence, the creature is at one with the purposes of divine providence. It is this understanding which Dante develops from his earliest contemplations of Beatrice, who is seen consistently as a gift, a miracle and a revelation of what the life of a human creature can and should be.

Vital as Beatrice's role has been throughout the *Paradiso*, she assumes particular significance in the closing stages of the *cantica*, not least because – against all logical expectation – she disappears from Dante's side in [canto 31](#). But in arriving at the *Primum Mobile* Dante also looks beyond the realm of human knowledge – and all the coherence that the universe promises to the philosophical mind – to imagine the nature of a world which can never be defined by space and time and rational discourse. An important indication of this is the reference at [lines 82–4](#) to Ulysses. Since Ulysses was first introduced in *Inferno* 26, Dante has consistently (and self-critically) matched his own journey of exploration against Ulysses' 'flight'. (Compare *Purgatorio* 1 and 19 and *Paradiso* 2.) Plainly there is much in Dante's own intellectual character that responds enthusiastically to the idea of a pursuit of experience which breaks all bounds. Indeed, it might seem that the final movement into the *Primum Mobile* and beyond is itself an ultimate version of Ulysses transgressive ambition. Yet, in fact, this is the reverse of transgression. For Dante's concern here is to imagine, not a departure or

assault upon the unknown, but rather a homecoming to the source of existence. Nor does this strictly involve any 'going beyond' at all, since all spatial and temporal considerations here disappear. And while, of course, Dante's own text is still written in linear sequence, his concern now is not to see a world different from that which Ulysses explored but that same world as it must look to the eye of religious belief, illuminated by those virtues of faith, hope and charity which, as [cantos 24–6](#) have shown, prepare the mind to participate in the processes of creation.

This alteration of viewpoint is particularly evident in [canto 28](#), which considers the relation of angelic forces to the workings of the cosmos. Here, Beatrice speaks of a miraculous connection that exists between the workings of the material universe and the power exerted by the nine orders of angelic beings. Angels for Dante are pure intelligences, themselves moved by an unwavering and intuitive understanding of the conditions under which God brought them into existence, and by a willingness to further the purposes of divine providence. (Only the rebel angels faltered in that understanding.) The universe is, therefore, not a machine at all but the articulation of an unchanging love of existence. 'Beyond' the *Primum Mobile* is a realm which is constituted neither by space and time, nor by cause and effect, nor by any supernatural version of earthly geography, but rather by intelligence and the desire to maintain the relationship of love between all existing beings. If God is thought to create freely out of nothing, creation will be at its fullest in a condition of free inter-relationship, as in the giving and receiving of gifts, in conversation or the playing of games. (At *Paradiso* 28: 126, Dante speaks of 'Angelic games'; compare also *Paradiso* 31: 133.)

At [lines 7–9](#), Dante anticipates the entry into the angelic order of intelligence when he speaks of a realm defined by joy, happiness, love and peace. It is in this sense that the universe at [line 4](#) is said to laugh with Dante, offering no longer the appearance merely of brute fact but rather of responsive and expressive conversation with Dante's own attentive countenance. It is in this realm that Dante will see as true human beings, with faces 'swayed to *caritas*' (*Paradiso* 31: 49), the spirits of the blessed who, since the earliest stages of his journey, have been seen merely as manifestations of light. It is in this realm, too, that speech is revealed to be essentially a matter of praise – in which the creature acknowledges its dependence on a transcendent being – rather than on analysis or argument. Dante has known how important praise is; it is for him the fundamental

condition of human speech since he first developed the ‘praise style’ of the *Vita nuova*. (See commentaries to *Purgatorio* 23–6.) This style – in a fully theological and poetically enriched form – has underlain all Dante’s thinking and writing in the *Paradiso* from the opening ‘Gloria’ of [canto 1](#). Now the opening lines of [canto 27](#) burst out (far more rhapsodically than the first lines of [canto 1](#)) with the ‘Gloria’ in praise of God that inebriates Dante at [lines 1–9](#).

The reverse side of praise, however, is polemic, directed at those who fail to recognize the possibilities inherent in human nature, or else consciously distort the perspectives that reveal – as praise does – the dependence of human beings on the transcendent. Anger and disappointment at such misconceptions underlie the whole of the *Inferno*. But *Paradiso* 27–9 and the conclusion of [canto 30](#) are as violent in their invective as any single passage of the first *cantica*. The target in each case is cupidity, which is the diametric opposite of *caritas*. Where charity reveals and participates in the gift of Creation, cupidity attempts to manipulate, and gain advantage from, the machine of the universe, displaying itself no less in attempts at intellectual possession of the world (as in Ulysses’ exploits) than in avarice or gluttony. The Church in particular, when it commits itself to gain or mastery, perverts the meaning of the *caritas* which it was founded to support. Dante’s perception of this appalling incongruity now produces, in both [canto 27](#) and [canto 29](#), a series of invectives against ecclesiastical corruption. [canto 29](#) reserves most of its venom for those preachers who distort the proper functions of word and argument. But [canto 27](#), at [lines 127–35](#), provides a horrifying picture of how innocent minds, when they are capable of adult speech, employ their faculties in a demand for earthly goods and, worse still, perversely turn against their mothers, wishing to see them dead. Worst of all is the corruption of the Church. The Church, as represented ideally in [cantos 23–6](#), is the guardian of *caritas*. Yet the modern Church, through its rapacity and intellectual pretension, has turned Saint Peter’s patrimony into a ‘shit hole / reeking of blood and pus’ ([25–6](#)).

Stylistically, [canto 27](#) is a supreme example of how varied in diction and register Dante’s poetry can be. The hymnic elevation of the opening sequence disappears [at lines 10–15](#). It is momentarily replaced by an extremely compressed astronomical fantasy: as Saint Peter’s countenance turns from praise to polemic, Dante – in order to describe the blush of indignation that suffuses the saint – imagines a wholly unnatural transformation in the

appearance of the planets, whereby Jupiter takes on the red hue – the ‘plumage’ – that is characteristic of Mars. Saint Peter’s speech at [lines 19–66](#) begins with a brutal, three-fold repetition of the phrase ‘*i l lu ogo mid*’ (‘my place’), which not only expresses the extent to which Saint Peter’s own territory has been betrayed by the modern papacy, but also recalls the three-fold betrayal that Saint Peter himself committed against Christ. True *caritas* can redeem treachery itself, as in Saint Peter’s case. Yet it is that understanding which is perverted by the saint’s successors. At the same time, there is an epic strand in this speech, recalling how the early Church was founded on the example of popes who were also martyrs ([40–45](#)), and comparing divine providence – the ultimate defence of the true order that should prevail in Rome – to the heroic Scipio, who defended Rome against Hannibal ([61–3](#)). In the central sequence of the canto ([67–75](#)), describing the ascent and disappearance of the saints, Dante draws on his knowledge of meteorology to produce another example of lyrical but fantastic science, describing the ascent in terms of an inverted snow storm. His own ascent to the *Primum Mobile* involves a final glance downward at the earth, in a mood not of polemic but of amused distance. (Compare *Paradiso* 22: 127–54, where Dante first goes up to Gemini.) Again, the arrival is marked by a rich, lyrical passage in which love poetry, mythology and astronomy all combine. [Lines 80–90](#) are notable for their internal patternings on ‘n’ and ‘m’ and the neologism ‘*donnea*’ (compare *Paradiso* 24: 118): ‘*La mente innamorata, che donnea...*’ The constellation Gemini – from which Dante now ascends – is designated by reference to Leda, who bore the twins Castor and Pollux as a result of being seduced by Jupiter in the form of a swan ([97–8](#)). [Lines 106–20](#), attributed to Beatrice, offer a lucid, poised account of a realm where light and love rather than visible lines are the principles of spiritual geometry. And geometry itself in its earthly manifestation is used to describe the *Primum Mobile*, which is beyond all kinds of measure yet is the principle factor in all measurements that the universe displays ([115–20](#)). In her conclusion, Beatrice, too, returns to the colloquial asperity of Saint Peter’s speech: corruption will turn good will into ruin just as continual rain will turn healthy plums into rotten husks (‘*bozzacchioni*’) ([124–6](#)). In the final lines of the canto, Beatrice adopts the stance of a prophet, speaking in menacingly enigmatic tones of how divine judgement will shortly fall upon the corrupt.

[22–7](#) The usurper referred to here is the contemporary pope whom Dante particularly detested, Boniface VIII, who held the papal throne in the year that Dante set out on his fictional otherworldly journey, 1300. (Compare *Inferno* 19: 52–7 and *Inferno* 26: 85 onwards.) The ‘sod’ so pleased by Boniface’s actions is Satan.

[40–45](#) Saint Peter and his two immediate successors, Saint Linus and Saint Cletus, were martyred in c. 67, c. 79 and c. 90 respectively. Popes Sixtus I (d. 125), Pius I (d. c. 155), Calixtus I (d. 222) and Urban I (d. 230) also died for the faith.

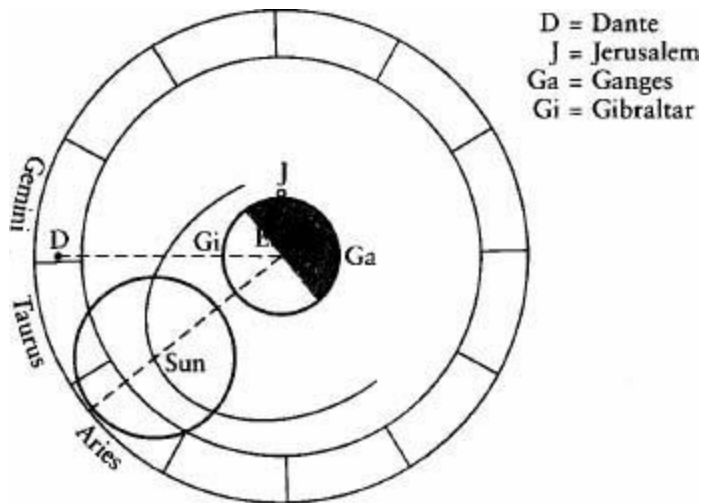
[46–54](#) Contemporary popes are here condemned for their involvement in contemporary politics, favouring on the ‘right hand’ the Guelf cause and condemning the Ghibellines. The ‘keys’ – representing the keys to the kingdom of Heaven given to Saint Peter – now become emblems on the battle standards of warrior popes, as in their campaigns for influence over the Italian peninsula against the Emperor Frederick II.

[58–60](#) The inhabitants of Cahors in southern France were notorious as usurious bankers favoured by the anti-Pope John XXII, a native of that city. Similarly, Pope Clement V favoured his fellow Gascons.

[61–3](#) Scipio Africanus the Elder defeated the Carthaginian forces under Hannibal that threatened Rome at the battle of Zama in 202 BC. This victory was decisive in ensuring Rome’s dominance as a Mediterranean power.

[67–9](#) The sun is in conjunction with Capricorn, the Goat, in midwinter, between 21 December and 21 January.

[79–87](#) Dante has been moving with the very slowly moving sphere of Fixed Stars. He has passed six hours in this sphere. On his arrival in this sphere, he was directly above the meridian of Jerusalem; now he is above the meridian of Cadiz, opposite Gibraltar.



From his new vantage point he can see westwards far into the Atlantic, following Ulysses' track. Eastwards he can see the shadowy coasts of Phoenicia, where Jupiter, disguised as a bull, carried off Europa, as narrated in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 2:833–75. Compare the reference to the rape of Leda at lines 97–9, as narrated in Ovid's *Heroides* 17: 55–6. The 'sign' referred to at line 87 is Aries, 30 degrees west of Dante's position.

[136–8](#) The white face of innocence turns black as adulthood approaches. This much-contested passage probably imagines the attraction of worldly goods which seduce as the '*bella figlia*' Circe – daughter of the sun – seduced Ulysses. (Compare *Purgatorio* 19: 1–24.)

[142–4](#) The Julian calendar miscalculated the length of a solar year by what Dante calls here the hundredth part of a day. Left uncorrected, January would eventually have become a springtime month, when birds announce the end of winter with their song. This long period of time is here referred to ironically, to indicate how soon the Day of Judgement will come.

CANTO 28

Dante contemplates the hierarchy of angelic beings that move in God's sight and in turn communicate to the material universe God's providential design.

COMMENTARY

The polemical contrast between cupidity and *caritas*, drawn so violently in

Paradiso 27 and 29, emerges in [canto 28](#) only briefly at lines 1–3. From this point on, the canto concerns itself with the relationship of the nine orders of angels to the nine spheres of the planetary universe, and offers, through the words that Dante attributes to Beatrice, a sustained dramatization of the religious mentality that, in the Empyrean, engages directly with the purposes of providence. She is the ‘in-paradizer’ of his mind, fusing it with the paradisaal sphere. This bold neologism not only defines the relationship of intellectual inter-penetration which Dante associates with religious experience (compare *Paradiso* 9: 80 and *Paradiso* 21: 83–7), but also anticipates a linguistic richness and inventiveness that is characteristic of [canto 28](#) in general.

At the same time, the occurrence of the word ‘vero’ – ‘truth’ – at line 2 is the first in a series that appears throughout the canto which point to a marked shift, appropriate to the final phases of the *Paradiso*, in the conception of what the truth is and of how we might enjoy it. (See [lines 8, 87, 136–7, 139](#).) Analysis and argument may lead us to say that a proposition is true. But in [canto 28](#) Dante points forward to the realization that the ultimate truth only resides in the existence of God – and is thus more properly understood as the experience of a person than a proposition. Thus he now begins to use ‘truth’ as a noun (in Italian, but not in English, ‘vero’ can be both noun and adjective), indicating an actual being to whom the human or angelic mind will respond, in a relationship of *caritas* rather than of calculation. Hence, at line 39, Dante, in a further neologism, speaks of the most elevated circle of angels ‘in-truthed’ in God. This unfamiliar truth may dazzle and tease our normal understanding of truth which assumes it to be an attribute rather than an ultimate reality. (The interplay at [lines 7–8](#) between ‘vero’ (‘truth’) and ‘vetro’ (‘glass’ or ‘mirror’) suggests that the distinctions beneath truth and illusion are not absolutely within the grasp of human minds.) But [canto 28](#) draws its reader away – sometimes playfully, and at all times with a peculiarly energetic rhythm – from any familiar, stable or obsessive conception of truth into a new dynamic of vision.

[Canto 28](#) does not offer a philosophical discussion of the angelic orders (though, as [lines 121–39](#) demonstrate, Dante was much exercised by the technicalities of medieval angelology). Rather, in common with many of Dante’s greatest pieces of poetry (such as *Purgatorio* 30), the present canto is a narrative lyrical enactment of a conversion in intellectual stance, and anticipates the other moments of ‘conversion’ which will punctuate the

concluding sequence of the *Paradiso*.

The crucial moment in canto [28](#), precipitating Beatrice's discussion of the angels, is the vision of God, symbolically, as an infinitesimally small point of light located *within*, rather than beyond, the circling spheres of the angelic hierarchies ([16–21](#)). Hitherto, Dante has seen (though not described) the fulminating presence of Christ in Paradise (*Paradiso* 14: 88–105 and 23: 19–33). The present vision emphasizes a fundamental understanding in theology which is that, although we do not know what God is like, we must proceed on the understanding that, unlike his creation, God is utterly simple, single and eternal. As such, the point of light must cause the eye that looks on it to close in self-protection against its intensity ([18](#)). And while the created order may resemble God as circles around a central point – a point being itself a circle yet not a circle, a location and yet no location at all – no creature, even if it is an angel, is more than a cloudy halo around the original light ([22–4](#)). But at no subsequent moment will Dante attempt to leap the gap between divine existence and creaturely existence. To do so would be to follow the example of Satan. Instead, he emphasizes the energies that are released by a proper understanding of the relationship between the point and the circles, and the constant experience of surprise that sustains this relationship. It is in this sense that Paradise ([115–16](#)) can be understood as a 'sempiternal' spring, a constant regeneration of new energies.

Since Francesca failed at the fatal point at *Inferno* 5:132, which 'overcame' her and Paolo while reading a French Romance, the word '*punto*' / 'point' has always for Dante carried particular weight, as an indication of those crucial *turning* points which punctuate and give meaning to existence. The shock which the '*punto*' (the word is obsessively repeated throughout [canto 28](#)) administers to human logic is expressed in the doubts that Dante voices at [lines 46–51](#): that logic, built upon notions of spatial hierarchy and quantity, would lead one to expect a God placed beyond, rather than within, his own creation, and greater in dimension. In the Empyrean such terms as these can have no meaning. There is none the less a new and surprising logic – 'a wonderful coincidence' ([76](#)) – in observing the relationship of the divine point to the angelic circles. As Beatrice explains in [lines 40–78](#) – frequently using the vocabulary of 'miracle' and 'wonder' that Dante always associates with her – this relationship is to be understood in terms rather of intensity of life – of '*virtù*' – than of extension or magnitude. On that understanding, the angels that spin in the tightest circle around the divine point are the greatest

in their love of God (see [lines 43–5](#) and [72](#)). But, insofar as the angels are also the intelligent movers of the planetary system, each order of angels is related proportionately to a corresponding sphere of the planetary system – the least intense with the smallest of the heavens and the most intense to the greatest in dimension ([76–8](#)) even though, in the material sphere, magnitude is related to ‘health’ or perfection of being ([67–9](#)).

Modern science fiction has accustomed readers to moments in which the protagonist passes from one dimension to another. Here, in his theological fiction, Dante draws on the deepest resources of his narrative and linguistic art to engage the reader in the experience of a similar shift.

[Lines 1–12](#) identify Beatrice – in whose eyes Dante first sees the reflection of the angelic hierarchy – as the human medium through which this conversion can be effected – here as at every other point in the narrative. (Compare the reflection of the Gryphon in Beatrice’s eyes in *Purgatorio* 31.) There is an element in [line 12](#), with its familiar trope of the bonds of love, of conventionally decorative love poetry. But in the course of the canto, similar references to binding and knotting are applied to the angelic order whose inter-connections at [line 100](#) are compared to a swirling ball of vine tendrils (‘*vimi*’). Here, as in all the cantos of the concluding sequence, Dante reiterates the conviction – fundamental to his vision – that human love can be translated into the love of God. Indeed, at [line 72](#), the highest of the angelic ranks is said to be that which in loving most also knows most fully.

The implications of this are already apparent in [lines 25–36](#), where the language of mathematical calculation is converted into the language of exuberant lyricism, of alliteration, patterned sound (as in ‘*quarto... quinto... quarto... quinto*’ at [lines 29–30](#)), and where geometry is rendered not only by conceptions of definitive line but also by the impressionistic allusion at [line 32](#) to ‘Juno’s messenger’, the rainbow. Similar qualities distinguish Beatrice’s explanation of the apparent misfit between angelic and cosmic logic, in particular at [lines 67–9](#) and [77–8](#), as also [lines 88–93](#), where the angelic circles lose all geometric regularity, seething and sparkling like boiling metal and challenging numerical considerations by their all-but-innumerable numbers.

At [lines 79–87](#) Beatrice’s speech, intended to clarify Dante’s mind, uses a particularly ornate, even baroque simile which pictures the mind swept clean by her words, as the sky might be by a brisk northerly wind. Truth is now seen as sharply as a star might be seen in a winter sky. Yet the personification

of the north wind, blowing from its gentler cheek – as though it were an illustration in some ancient map – anticipates an emphasis upon the ‘face’, or personal character, of truth which increases in the closing cantos until the final moment when Dante sees God’s indescribable features. Then, in [lines 115–20](#), a similar richness of diction and rhythm brings Dante to point through an ecstatic negation of the astronomical order: when the constellation Aries rises at night, the season is autumn and trees lose their leaves; but the angelic orders enjoy an eternal spring, singing as birds do at the end of winter. Dante here uses the word ‘*sbernare*’, which has both Latin and Occitan love poetry associations, signifying both the exit from winter and the springtime song of birds. Rhythms are lengthened to the point of languor in the word ‘*perpetualmente*’ and in the enjambment ‘*tree*’. The word ‘three’ appears repeatedly in varied forms: ‘*ternaro*’, ‘*tre*’, ‘*tree*’ and ‘*s’interna*’.

The canto concludes ([133–9](#)) with a comic reflection upon the relationship between the human mind and eternal truth, and on the difference between human and angelic intellects. (See also introduction, p. xxviii.) Throughout the canto, Dante implicitly revisits a question which he first raised in the *Convivio* concerning the exact order in which the denominations of angels are arranged in the heavenly hierarchy. This question had been long debated. Now Dante changes his mind and follows the Pseudo-Dionysius ([130](#)), who, in his highly influential work, appears to follow Saint Paul (who is referred to obliquely at [line 138](#)). (See notes below.) On one understanding, Dante may here be said to claim particular authority for his present view, on the grounds that he has actually witnessed with his own eyes the order in Heaven. Saint Paul, too, had travelled ‘in body’ to this Heaven. (Compare *Inferno* 2: 28–30.) At the same time, it is significant that Dante includes in [canto 28](#), as the one human being to whom he refers in the canto except Beatrice, a reference to the thinking of Pope Gregory the Great (c. 540–604), whose view of the angelic orders was different yet again. Yet Saint Gregory here is shown laughing at himself. The moment he opens his eyes in Heaven he realizes how wrong he was ([135](#)). But such laughter implies a liberating view of all pretensions to human logic and authority. Human beings are not angelic intelligences; and for them, to be wrong is not to be excluded from Heaven. Even without the direct and intuitive grasp of truth that angels possess, human individuals can still, wholly and delightfully, participate in the truth that now awaits them in the Empyrean.

NOTES

[52–4](#) In this further attempt to find words for a realm defined by love and light beyond space and time, Dante not only makes use of the Latinate ‘*miro*’ but also plays significantly upon the word ‘*templo*’. With reference to the Latinate *templum* – which produces the English ‘template’ – a ‘temple’ is a place set apart by topographical designation. The Empyrean, however, is set apart by the contemplation of our final goal and end in God.

[82–4](#) Dante’s ‘*paroffia*’ here translated as ‘steeple’ – is an unusual word for ‘parish’, hence ‘region’. The surprise of the word is increased by its appearing in an unexpected rhyme with ‘*roffta*’, which signifies the detritus drawn from ox hides in the process of tanning.

[91–3](#) To follow the sequence established when the first square of a chessboard equals 1, the second 2, the third 4, the fourth 8 and so on produces at the sixty-fourth square a number with twenty figures: 18,500,000,000,000,000,000. A legend – referred to by the Occitan poets Peire Vidal and Folco of Marseilles (see *Paradiso* 9) – tells of how a Persian king offered the inventor of chess a reward which placed one grain of corn on the first square of the board and followed the progression through to its unexpectedly huge conclusion.

[94–6](#) The Latin ‘*ubi*’ (‘where’) is a term from Scholastic philosophy, used as a noun.

[109–14](#) Here (as also at *Paradiso* 29: 139–41) Dante enters a dispute, current in his day, as to whether beatitude depends upon sight (or knowledge) or upon love. Here he associates himself with Aquinas and the Dominicans rather than the Franciscans (compare *Paradiso* 14: 40–41), in arguing that, while love is the ultimate condition of our relationship with God, we must first see what we love. This position resists an exaggeratedly mystic conception of beatitude, and has a bearing on how Dante finally presents his vision of God. (See commentary on *Paradiso* 33.)

[130–35](#) Dionysius the Areopagite, reputedly the first bishop of Athens, is mentioned in Acts 17: 34. He was thought to have been converted by Saint Paul and to have written a treatise on the angelic hierarchy, *De Coelesti hierarchia*. The authenticity of this work was subsequently disproved and the work was therefore attributed to the Pseudo-Dionysius. Saint Gregory expounded his view of the angels in his *Moralia in Librum Beati iob*. The rankings ascribed to angels are, from highest to lowest, as follows:

Dionysius and <i>Paradiso</i>	Dante in <i>Convivio</i>	Gregory
Seraphim	Seraphim	Seraphim
Cherubim	Cherubim	Cherubim
Thrones	Powers	Thrones
Dominions	Principalities	Dominions
Virtues	Virtues	Principalities
Powers	Dominions	Powers
Principalities	Thrones	Virtues
Archangels	Archangels	Archangels
Angels	Angels	Angels

CANTO 29

Continuing to discuss the order of the angelic hierarchies, Beatrice speaks of the creation of the universe, referring in particular to the creation of the angels and the fall of Lucifer. She concludes with an attack on false preachers and those who trust speculation rather than Scripture.

COMMENTARY

The linguistic and rhythmic brilliance of [canto 28](#), as well as its liberating comedy, are replaced in the first half of [canto 29](#) by a rigorously theological discussion of the creation of the universe and, in the second half, by a return to the polemical idiom of [canto 27](#), with an attack on the appetite displayed by the preachers of Dante's own day for the trivial speculations of contemporary science.

The major sequence of *Paradiso* 29 ([10–84](#)) includes Dante's fullest account of the act of divine creation, and has been discussed at length in the introduction, pp. xlv-1. It is worth repeating, however, that the exactitude which Dante here exemplifies in his use of philosophical terms (as, for

example, in [lines 22–4](#)) and in the strength of his argumentation is properly (from a Christian point of view) framed by reference to the traditions of the Church and Scriptures ([37–42](#)). Whatever rational analysis may say about the nature of existence, faith is the way to the enjoyment of existence. Which is not to say that reasoning cannot clarify the terms of our existence or that it cannot itself be one of the pleasures of existence. [Lines 13–24](#) in particular are unparalleled in their use of the resources of verse – its caesurae, line endings and rhymes – to enforce the structure of syntax and shape the progression of the poet’s thought. Subordinate clauses ([14–17](#)) are marked off by such means. The rhyme on ‘-isto’ allows the technical term ‘*subsisto*’ – meaning ‘I enjoy independent existence’ – to occupy a particularly salient position, while the progression from ‘*splendore*’ through ‘*fore*’ to ‘*amore*’ keeps the reader’s attention firmly fixed upon the active shining-forth of eternal love – the response of the creature being captured by the echoing of ‘*splendore*’ in ‘*risplendendo*’ and of ‘*eterno amore*’ by the preceding ‘*nuovi amore*’. In classical times, Lucretius may have similarly reconciled poetry and philosophy. In the wake of Dante, not even Milton or Goethe have achieved or even attempted anything so precise.

In contrast to the theological precision of its central section, [canto 29](#) opens and closes with sequences that in different ways acknowledge the limitations of all human language. [Lines 1–9](#) draw on the resources of both astronomical science and mythology to designate a moment that simply cannot be registered on any humanly intelligible scale. (See notes below.) The paradox is that this moment is itself a supremely human moment, in which Beatrice turns and smiles according to a logic that cannot be articulated either by rhetoric or calculation. (Compare the ways in which Dante imagines detachment from time in the opening lines of [canto 30](#), and also the personified meteorology of *Paradiso* 28: 79–81.) The fullest expression of this understanding (which *defeats* understanding) will occur in the conclusion to [canto 33](#), where Dante finally realizes that the human being can only be accounted for fully in the infinity of the God who first created it.

On the other hand, language remains, for Dante, unambiguously central to the relationship between one human being and another, and here, as elsewhere, he speaks with venomous contempt for those who abuse language or diminish its seriousness. So Beatrice, at [lines 85–132](#), launches a particularly vigorous attack – punctuated by colloquialism, verbal invention and satirical parody – against the wilful confusions into which our tongues

may lead us. Preachers and university lecturers are moved – by vanity, avarice and a taste for flashy argument – to offer wholesale distortions of the truths that science and religion demand. Christ did not say ‘preach pure prattle’ to the world ([109–10](#)). But preachers do, pursuing a taste for jokes and comic routines ([115–17](#)). Fashionable theories, drawn from popular science, replace any serious meditation on the meaning of Christ’s passion ([97–102](#)). In all of this, the human reality that underlies and gives depth to the Scriptures – which are founded on the blood of martyrs ([91](#)) – is tragically obscured.

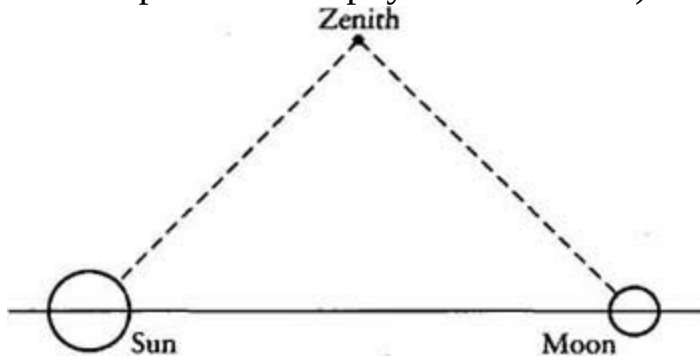
The canto ends with an attempt to return, quietly, to the evidence of Scripture and to a contemplation of how creation is founded upon the selfless love of a God who is prepared to ‘break’ himself ([142–4](#)), as He did on the Cross.

NOTES

[1–9](#) Astronomical and mythic references are employed here to designate a moment which is strictly out of time and indefinable within an astronomical scheme. As in the diagram opposite, Dante imagines how the sun and moon might be balanced at opposite points on the horizon. The twin offspring of Latona are Apollo (the sun) and Diana (the moon), and the ‘balance’ between them occurs when the sun is in the sign of Aries and the moon in the sign of Libra. But, since the movements of sun and moon never pause, the time between the moment when they are in balance and when they are loosed from that balance is infinitesimally small. This instantaneity is matched by the reference to light speed at lines 25–7.

[13–24](#) The terms ‘*subsisto*’, ‘*forma*’ and ‘*materia*’ are to be understood in the technical sense they possess in Scholastic philosophy. To subsist, or to have substance, is to be endowed by God with the capacity for independent intelligent existence. ‘Form’ is pure form, or spiritual character without material extension – the angels are pure form. ‘Matter’ is also pure, and should not be understood in terms of visible or quantifiable entities. Prime matter is pure potentiality, a capacity for existence which subsequently may become the elements of the physical universe ([22–4](#)). When pure form is conjoined with pure matter, the heavens and heavenly bodies are created. These three modes of being – form, matter and their conjunction – are a direct expression of God’s creative intention. They are, therefore,

incorruptible. (The human being, as discussed in *Paradiso* 7 and 13, is, uniquely, a conjunction of God's creative will and the generative processes that operate in the physical universe.)



[37–9](#) Jerome's view, expressed in his commentary on the Epistle of Saint Paul to Titus, is that angels were created long before the physical heavens. Aquinas disagrees (see *Summa Theologiae*, *Prima* 59 Art. 3), as does Dante, who here argues that some angels have the function of moving the spheres of the physical universe and could not be perfect unless, from the moment of their creation, they were able to perform that function. Creation is, therefore, simultaneous.

[64–6](#) The important point here is that grace, far from being given as a reward for merit, is itself given to make merit possible. Such grace is a response to love and the capacity for love is foreordained. (Compare the implications of *Paradiso* 32.)

[124–6](#) Saint Anthony is usually depicted with a hog at his feet – to symbolize his defeat of the Devil in the form of carnal pleasure. The monks of the Order of Saint Anthony kept herds of swine but, as Dante suggests here, paid for the upkeep of these herds through the issue of spurious indulgences. These monks were among the most notorious abusers of pardons in Dante's time, becoming servants rather than masters of the carnal 'hog'.

[133–8](#) Angels are innumerable and, though Dante speaks of them in groups, strictly speaking each single angel is a species in itself, each being as different from another as a dolphin is from a delphinium or a dog from a diamond. (See D. Keck, *Angels and Angelology in the Middle Ages* (New York and Oxford, 1998).)

Dante ascends from the Primum Mobile to the true eternity of the Empyrean where all the souls are gathered whom, hitherto, he has seen distributed among the planetary spheres. He sees the court of Heaven shaped in the form of a Rose and notes that there is an empty throne, awaiting the arrival of the Emperor, Henry VII.

COMMENTARY

The three cantos which precede the final approach to God in [canto 33](#) could be taken to illustrate, in concentrated form, three of the major poetic principles on which the *Commedia* has, from first to last, depended. Dante's poem is nothing if not well planned, even diagrammatic, in establishing the shapes and dispositions of the worlds that the poet invents. [canto 32](#) (to the frustration of some readers) is almost entirely diagrammatic in character, asking the reader to imagine very precisely how the saints in the Empyrean are located within the rose formation that the poet speaks of first in [canto 30](#) at [lines 103–29](#). [canto 31](#), on the other hand, depicts in dramatic terms the wholly unexpected replacement of Beatrice, as Dante's guide, by Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (described as a dignified old man). And here, as similarly in *Paradiso* 28 and *Purgatorio* 30, Dante's orchestration of narrative surprise is inextricably linked with the theological implications of his understanding – developing as the *Commedia* proceeds – that God is an unknowable, but always generative, mystery. [canto 30](#) itself displays to the utmost degree the capacity for visual invention that is often one of the first aspects of Dante's art to attract the reader, and which here extends beyond the sphere of physical description into a highly wrought experiment in the poetry of light and optical suggestion.

At [lines 39–44](#), Dante is told by Beatrice that he has now risen to the Empyrean. This sphere is illuminated by purely intellectual rather than physical light, where, in the clarity of intellectual understanding, he will see not only the ranks of angels but also the gathering of all those human beings whom hitherto he has witnessed, in passing, during his climb through the planetary spheres, as manifestations of light. (See [lines 100–102](#).)

Until Beatrice speaks, the final ascent is imperceptible. The opening lines of the canto cast a last glance back to the distant world of space and time,

noting that, in terms of that world, the time is an hour before dawn. (See notes below for diagram.) The ‘*Forse*’ / ‘Maybe’ with which the first *terzina* opens suggests a nostalgic yet nonchalant detachment from such considerations. And the game which the angelic orders play around the ‘point’ of God’s existence is closing, as when the sight of stars in the sky closes as sunlight spreads through the dawn sky. (Note here the oxymoron – challenging any ordinary logic – of closures brought about by *light*, as also, at [lines 10–12](#), to enclosing circles seemingly ‘enclosed’ by their own central point.) But where this might have led previously (as in [canto 1](#)) to a description of how swiftly Dante is progressing, [lines 13–36](#) concentrate entirely on Beatrice’s smile, celebrating the inexpressible influence that she has, from the first, exerted on Dante’s life, in terms comparable to those of [canto 23](#), lines 54–69 and, subsequently, [canto 31](#), lines 73–90. So, a gap is introduced into the predictable narrative sequence of [canto 30](#). And, simultaneously, Dante confesses to the gap in linguistic competence that his text must always acknowledge in its encounter with the divine – though it should be noted that this gap also points to a continual point of coherence and stability beyond the reach of words. Such confessions have, of course, punctuated every sequence of the third *cantica* (see introduction, pp. lviii–lxiv), but this one is particularly important in the structure not only of [canto 30](#) but of the whole conclusion to the *Paradiso*.

In the first place, no previous instance of the inexpressibility *topos* has been as comprehensive as this. [Lines 22–4](#) acknowledge the limits under which the whole of Dante’s poetic enterprise has been conducted, and indeed the limits of all literature, whether tragic or comic. Yet the tone of these lines is one of exhilaration rather than frustration, registering directly the freedom which follows on from the abandonment of illogical pretensions. The elevation of Dante’s diction is apparent in the Latinate ‘*tuba*’ – war trumpet – of [line 35](#) and a concise, articulate syntax. In terms of religious logic, it is precisely through the abandonment of logic that an ascent towards the utter simplicity and unknowability of God becomes possible. The intellectual light ([40–42](#)) which is the subject of [canto 30](#), is attained, some might say, through the mystic ‘cloud of unknowing’. And Dante’s procedure is certainly in harmony with this understanding. But there are differences of emphasis here, marking Dante off from any school of thought which would suppose that mystic iconoclasm required the erasure of all words, or images or reference to the human person. On the contrary, abnegation, on Dante’s part, is a way to

the angelic intelligence in which the words, images and, above all, persons are approached in the light of a new life, a new mode of perception and new understanding of value. It is for this reason that, in the second place, the present passage is specifically concerned with the inexpressible beauty of Beatrice's smile. For, as Dante explicitly declares at [lines 19–21](#), only God can fully recognize the extent and nature of Beatrice's beauty, and it is for that reason that ([34–6](#)) Dante defers to the greater proclamation of divine intention that will occur on the Day of Resurrection. Only the Creator can fully know the creatures He has created. Which is also to say, that human persons, mysterious as they must be at heart, and distant from the comprehension of other human persons, are equally – as Beatrice always is – miraculous. It is in this perspective, revealed by abnegation, that things, words and persons, however limited, will once again assume their true and absolute value. To use the beautiful words of [line 78](#), all things are truest when seen to be 'shadowy prefaces' (*'umbriferi prefazi'*) of their ultimate truth, as creatures of God.

This same understanding of mystery and distance will be emphasized by the departure of Beatrice from Dante's side in [canto 31](#). [canto 30](#), once it has enacted this moment of abnegation, now follows Dante's progressive initiation into the mode of seeing required by the intellectual light of, to quote Revelation 21: 1, 'a new heaven and a new earth'. Revelation 22: 1, which speaks of a 'water of life, as clear as a crystal', may well have been in Dante's mind at [lines 61–8](#), where he first envisages how, to the religious eye, the underlying structure of all created things lies not in some material or atomic substrate but in the light of intellectual intention. The Book of Revelation offers an archetypal image of spiritual renewal. And so does Dante's text. Here he imaginatively re-applies all the exactitude and precision that hitherto have characterized his description of natural phenomena, and clearly delineates (in a way that some have described as 'psychedelic') the co-ordinates and dynamics of the incandescent stream, where fire and water meet as one in the form of light. The forward flow of the stream is captured first ([62](#)). Then fire joins water in an oxymoronic description as sparks fly sideways out of the stream. The eye moves laterally along the arc of fire flecks towards the river banks, with their profusion of springtime flowers. These miraculous (*'mirabil* ([line 63](#))) light flowers are then seen (in mineral rather than organic terms) as rubies in circular rather than linear settings of gold. (At [line 90](#), likewise, linear geometry resolves into circularity.) Finally,

the sense of taste and smell are brought into play, as the sparks fly back from their momentary position as gem stones, ‘drunk’ on the perfume of the flowers, returning with almost comic eccentricity of movement to sink deep once more into the stream – which has now become a circular vortex (64–9).

As manifestations of intellectual light, the phenomena described in [canto 30](#) are sacramental, in the sense that they reveal in their own being the reality that creates and sustains them. Correspondingly, at [lines 79–99](#), Dante imagines a celestial version of the sacrament of baptism, in which, as though returning to childhood (82–4), his eyes are initiated into an ever deeper understanding of divine meaning. At a similar turning point in *Purgatorio* 30–31, Dante’s narrative depicted a comparable process, and references to a state of childhood innocence and potentiality recur significantly in the second *cantica* from its central cantos onward. So, too, in the *Paradiso*, references to childhood – and often, as in [canto 30](#), to the act of suckling – punctuate the concluding phase of the *cantica*, especially in the final approach to God (*Paradiso* 33: 106–8). Innocence, however, does not at these moments signify inertia or fragility, but rather a condition of energy and a capacity for growth, where desire is constantly satisfied and constantly renewed. So, at [lines 85–8](#), the metaphors that Dante employs suggest how his eye expands, to fill the ‘eaves of his brow’ with the river of light, as if momentarily he himself could contain within the housing of his eye socket the whole stream of Empyrean light. And at this moment a transformation takes place in which the linear direction of the stream becomes a perfect circle (90). More important still, the ultimate reality of human faces – of the persons, and supremely the person of God whose mutual love defines the structure of the Empyrean – is revealed, as if at last divested of their masks (91–3), to satisfy the desire that Dante first expressed in [canto 22](#)., lines 58–60.

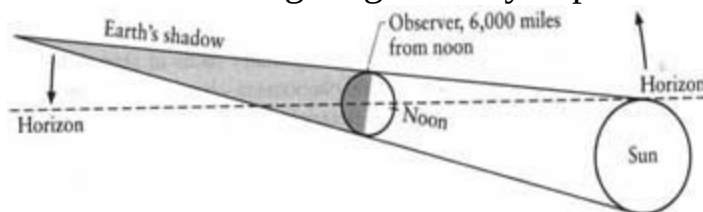
Throughout the *Commedia*, Dante’s primary focus of attention – despite his evident interest in natural phenomena – has been the human person, above all the person of Beatrice. In the *Inferno*, faces are terribly and unnaturally distorted. In the *Purgatorio* the human form struggles to realize its ultimate significance. Now, Dante is able to contemplate the saints, who for him are not conventionally pious figments of the religious imagination, but nameable individuals whose presence in history, as now in the Empyrean, is itself sacramental in bearing the weight and light of divine reality. Like Beatrice, the saints are mirrors of God’s creative energy. So, in yet another extraordinary invention, Dante imagines the saints in rose formation leaning

on the outer circumference of the *Primum Mobile* ([109–20](#)), taking light from above and reflecting it down, so that, like a hill reflected in a lake, the flowers on the hillside are mirrored in the water beneath. The play of geometric form, which [canto 30](#) sustains throughout, here combines with perceptions of various kinds of light, virtual and real. And, though the reality underlying all is the reality of God's mind, the reality of human persons is seen to be that which underlies the physical phenomena of hill, lake and flower. The 'flowers' and 'green' reflected here are the inhabitants of the Empyrean.

The reverse of such refinement of perception is the 'cupidity' that Dante attacks at [lines 139–48](#), a blindness to the ultimate significance of created things, a malign enchantment which bewitches the child and turns its natural desires into a perverse resistance to the food it needs ([141](#)). Such stupidity has been Dante's constant target throughout the *Commedia*, often in a specifically political direction. Nor does his contemplation of the saints lead him, even here, into a wholly otherworldly detachment from questions of justice and history. At [lines 136–8](#) he speaks of how a throne is reserved in the Celestial Rose for the Emperor Henry VII, on whom the poet had placed his last hopes for a restoration of justice in the greed-riven realm of Italy. (See especially *Purgatorio* 6 and 7.) The hope may be faint. But even here Dante sees, in the community of *caritas*, a model which is consistent with, and recognizes the order that should prevail in, the realm of human justice.

NOTES

[1–3](#) The following diagram may explain the astronomy behind this passage.



About an hour before sunrise at any point on earth, the sun, 6,000 miles to the east, will be at its noon-time point, below the horizon. At that same time, towards the west, the conical shadow that the earth casts into the cosmic system will be lowering close to the western horizon.

[46–8](#) 'Spirits' here is used in a technical and physiological sense, referring to the optical organ and the process of seeing.

[94–6](#) The two courts of Heaven are that of the angels and that of those who await the resurrection of the body in the Empyrean.

[133–8](#) These lines refer to Henry VII of Luxembourg, who was Holy Roman Emperor from 1308 to 1313. His death (before the composition of the *Paradiso*) disappointed Dante's hopes of a renewal of political justice in Italy. (Compare *Purgatorio* 6 and 7.)

[142–8](#) This is a reference to Pope Clement V (1264–1314). (Compare *Inferno* 19: 83, where Clement is condemned to Hell as a simonist.) Clement initially supported Henry VII but, under pressure from the Philip IV of France, eventually transferred his support, when Henry entered Italy, to the Angevin Robert of Naples. Simon Magus is the prototype of all corrupt clergy. The final reference to the Anagnese Pope is to the especially corrupt Pope Boniface VIII, who was born in Anagni. (See *Inferno* 19.)

CANTO 31

*Dante views all the souls of the blessèd gathered now
within the Empyrean. Beatrice leaves his side to
return to her place among the saints. Her position
is taken by Saint Bernard, who, as Dante's last
guide, points out to him the throne of the
Blessed Virgin Mary.*

COMMENTARY

In contrast to the blindness of the world that Dante attacked at the conclusion of [canto 30](#), [canto 31](#) displays to view the congregation of saints and angels as a model of what existence in a perfect community, founded upon the faith, could be. At [lines 31–40](#), Dante compares his own arrival here to that of a barbarian arriving in Rome and viewing the astonishing architecture of the capital of the world. In a final irresistibly polemical assault on the Florence that sentenced him to exile, the poet comments on how much greater his wonder must be in that he arrives in this place of justice and sanity having journeyed from such a troubled homeland. The canto in its imagery points back, by way of contrast, to the opening of *Inferno* 1. Where the poem began in the isolation, confusion and sterility of the dark wood, it now envisages a condition of communal harmony which is also a condition of untrammelled fruitfulness and perpetual growth. Though in the form of a rose, whose schematic outline can be taken to designate a hierarchy of beatitudes (see

[canto 32](#).), shape is here designated entirely by the human forms that willingly assume this configuration, and growth here is only metaphorically organic growth. It is intelligent desire alone – not the desire for possession but for existence itself – that motivates the constant fluttering of angels, fanning their flanks with their own wings at [lines 13–18](#), and now released even from the spirallings of [canto 28](#) between the petals of the Rose and the presence of God.

As in [line 25](#), the evocation of this secure and jubilant realm (*‘questo sicuro e gaudioso regno’*) is marked by a considerable elevation of Latinate diction. (Compare [lines 41, 49–51, 58–63](#)). In narrative structure, too, the canto for the most part follows in remarkably dignified and steady sequence, contrasting with the preceding a canto, with all its kaleidoscopic transmutation of effects, and even more with the final canto, which is scanned by staccato leaps and discontinuities. Yet at [lines 58–64](#), a disjunction occurs, comparable to that which takes place in *Purgatorio* 30 with the disappearance of Virgil, though wholly different in its implication. It is at this point that Dante turns, as always, to Beatrice with further questions in his mind, only to find that her place at his side has been taken by Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, identified as such at [line 102](#).

The shock of this apparent loss is registered at [line 64](#) in the blunt and urgent phrase: ‘Where is she?’ (Compare *Purgatorio* 32: 85.) The surprise of the moment has a distinct theological function in revealing how far the human mind is from conceiving any comprehensive expectation of divine reality. At the same time, the shock of this disappearance also carries the essentially mysterious reassurance that the individual creature resides not in the minds of other human beings alone but ultimately and most truly in the mind of its creator. This is in reality the answer to any questions that Dante may have still to put to Beatrice: the utter singularity of each human existence is for God alone to know. This is not to say, however, that Beatrice has been absorbed indistinguishably into God. She has simply taken her place, as Dante sees at [line 77](#), in the communal order of saints who, in living with the logic of divine existence, also display the conditions under which human existence is to be properly enjoyed. In this respect, it is both remarkable and consistent that, from her place in the Rose, as distant from Dante as a thunder cloud might be from the depths of the sea ([73–5](#)), Beatrice paradoxically seems clearer to Dante’s eye than at any earlier point in his life. Here Dante translates the fundamental love motif of troubadour poetry –

which is that love ‘at a distance’ (*‘amor de lonh’*) is a purifying power – into a profoundly religious understanding of how love, whether from God or from human beings, makes possible and sustains the otherness and difference of the one who is loved. There is no idolatry in this position. Beatrice is not ‘*worshipped* from afar’. Her disappearance and reappearance express, rather, the reality of what it means for a human being to have been created by God.

Saint Bernard has his part to play in introducing Dante to the final experience of such reality. His function in the *Commedia* is not strictly to guide Dante, or to answer his questions, as Virgil and Beatrice have done, but rather to stand by his side as an example and assurance that the ultimate vision of God is possible. And yet, as ever, Dante’s choice of Saint Bernard and his fictional treatment of him are highly original.

In the first place, there are some surprising omissions in Dante’s emphasis. Saint Bernard, living a century before Dante was born, was the most prominent churchman of his day. Successfully attempting to reform the monastic orders, he attracted much aristocratic support for the austere Cistercian rule which he first established in the monasteries of Burgundy. His power extended into the political arena, where he was able to convince his protegee, Pope Eugenius III (d. 1153), to embark (disastrously) on the Second Crusade. Bernard also did much to encourage an acknowledgement of papal supremacy. Yet Dante, despite his own political interests and suspicion of authoritarian popes, makes no allusion to this turbulent history. Nor does he mention the extent to which Bernard’s theological position led him into controversial conflict with certain intellectuals of the period whom Dante himself might be supposed to have admired, notably Peter Abelard. Intellect itself, for Bernard, offers a less sure path towards the truth of God than *caritas* and contemplation. Dante does not always sympathize with this view, but he appears to find it appropriate in the final stages of a spiritual quest.

Against the apparent grain of his own intellectual inclinations, Dante seems to have seen in Saint Bernard a way, finally, of articulating two of his deepest concerns: a devotion to the Virgin Mary and a realization that desire – even erotic desire – can drive the human being towards an immediate encounter with the source of its own existence. In hymns devoted to the Blessed Virgin – and written in the luxuriant and emotive vein that also characterizes his prose and won for him a nickname as ‘the mellifluous teacher’ – Bernard makes a very significant contribution to the development of Marian devotion which gave so great an impetus to European culture

around the turn of the millennium. (See commentary to *Paradiso* 2.3 and introduction, pp. 1–lviii.) It is thus appropriate that Saint Bernard’s main function in the *Paradiso* should be to sing the ‘Hymn to the Blessed Virgin’ that occupies the first third of [canto 33](#). But the cult of the Blessed Virgin was closely connected with the changes in sensibility that also produced the courtly love tradition. Bernard shares with this tradition a dawning interest in Neoplatonic thinking about the nature of desire. And the result, in his case, is the sequence of sermons in the Song of Solomon, in which the rich eroticism of the scriptural original is maintained yet translated into an account of how the soul is driven by desire to union with Christ. The following example takes the opening verse of the Song and luxuriantly develops a parallel between erotic encounter and the exquisite pleasures of finding Christ in the text of Scripture itself:

Tell us, I entreat you, by whom, about whom and to whom it is said: ‘Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth.’ How shall I explain so abrupt a beginning, this sudden irruption as from a speech in mid-course? The words spring out at us as if indicating one speaker to whom another is replying as she demands a kiss – whoever she may be... She does not, however, say: ‘Let him kiss me *with his mouth*’; but something much more intimate: ‘with the kiss of his mouth’. What a gorgeous turn of phrase this is, prompted into life by the kiss, with Scripture’s own engaging countenance inspiring the reader and enticing him on, that he may find pleasure even in the laborious pursuit of what lies hidden, with a fascinating theme to sweeten the fatigue of research.

Sermon 1: 3

In the concluding lines of *Paradiso* 10, Dante showed how he could adapt the marriage imagery of the Song of Solomon to his own purposes. Now, though Dante’s style remains, on the whole, more restrained and chaste than Saint Bernard’s, he looks to the master of contemplative desire for a confirmation that erotic love and divine love need not be out of sympathy.

NOTES

[31–6](#) The barbarians come from the north, the region of the constellations of Ursa Major and Ursa Minor. The nymph Helice (or Callisto) was transformed by Jupiter into the Great Bear, her son Areas or Bootes into the Lesser Bear. (See Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 2: 496–530.) The Lateran had been the Imperial palace in Rome until Constantine removed his seat to Constantinople. In Dante’s day, it was the palace of the popes.

[103–8](#) Legend has it that Saint Veronica wiped the face of Christ as he went towards the crucifixion, and that the towel she used subsequently bore the image of Christ’s features. This towel was displayed as a relic in Saint

Peter's, Rome, annually on 8 March, attracting pilgrims from countries as distant (to Dante) as Croatia.

[124–6](#) Phaeton, son of Apollo, who drove the chariot of the sun to wild destruction, is referred to on three other occasions in the *Commedia* – at *Inferno* 17: 106–8, and at *Purgatorio* 4: 72–5, 29: 115–20. Dante's source is Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1: 750–76 and 2: 1–366. The reference here is to the rising of the sun (the chariot pole) over the western horizon.

[127–9](#) The 'oriflamme' was the red and gold battle standard (here by contrast 'a peace pennant') of the kings of France, first used in 1152 and last used at the battle of Agincourt in 1415.

[133–5](#) These lines refer to the Virgin Mary.

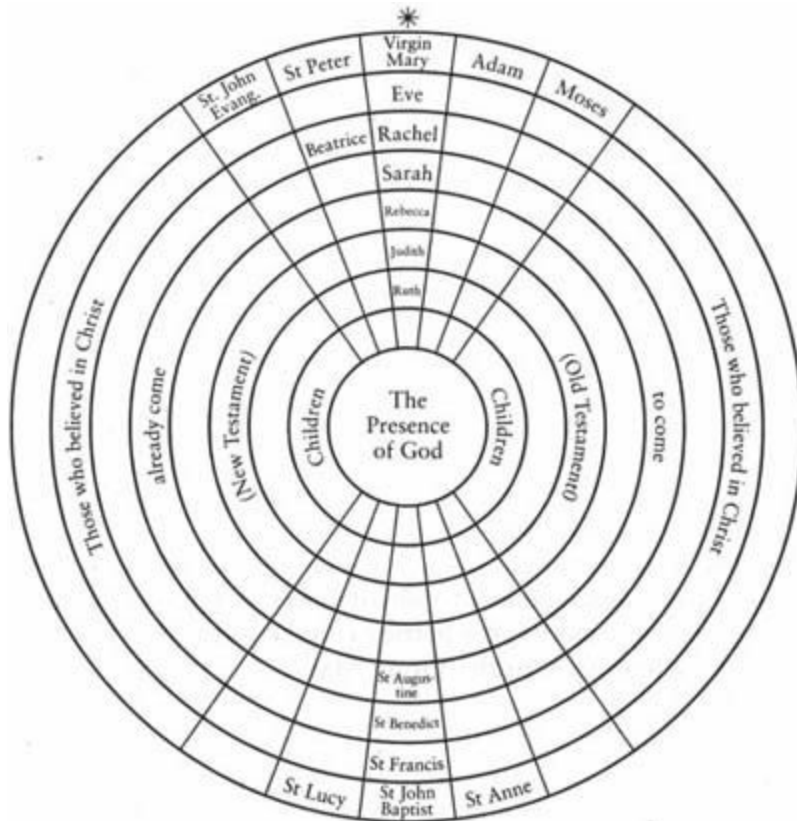
CANTO 32

*Saint Bernard indicates the places occupied in the
rose by those who have believed in Christ to come,
and in Christ once He has come. He speaks of
predestination and grace.*

COMMENTARY

[Canto 32](#) could be read as if it were the verbalization of the rose window of a great Gothic cathedral, with Saint Bernard acting as the informed interpreter. There is, in diagrammatic terms, no more intricate canto in the *Commedia* than this, as Dante imagines the subdivisions and hierarchies that might be discerned in the concentric circles and descending tiers of the bloom, and also, seemingly, considers the significance of placings which face each other across the diameter. Indeed, scholars still disagree about the exact disposition of figures within the diagram – especially about the positions of Saint Lucy and Saint Anne; and the version offered on p. 466 is only one of several that could be provided. It is important, however, to recognize – as it would be in viewing a rose window – that the intricacy of Dante's design was not intended simply to dramatize or give information about the lives of the saints on earth or even in Heaven. Nor should it be supposed that Dante has reverted here to that notion of spatial hierarchization which he rejected as inapplicable to eternity – and to his poem – as early as [canto 4](#). Here, as throughout the third *cantica*, Dante admits that the words and images he

inscribes on the page are entirely conventional in character, to be understood in terms of metaphor and analogy. And the result is to be regarded as much in terms of play and enjoyment as of definitive judgement. The modern secular mind might regard Dante's apparent interest here in rankings and groupings as similar to that very human appetite for fantasy soccer or cricket teams, with all the pleasures of selection and subtle management that those provide. Art historians, on the other hand, may prefer to think of the Arena Chapel in Padua, tracing how the narrative of Giotto's frescoes allows a constant search for new significance in the paralleling of particular scenes on a vertical axis, and even across the chapel floor on opposite walls. But, essentially, the mentality from which the present canto flows is that which is supremely displayed in the performance of the Christian liturgy. The repeated rituals of the Church year yield a perspective which is quite different from that of the seasonal year, using the dates and divisions of the solar calendar purely as an analogical language with which to reveal the purposes of providence, which are themselves eternal. In liturgy, the past is recalled because it is eternally present and, in that sense, is at one with the future. The events of the Old Testament are fulfilled in the New, and scriptural readings in the liturgy reinforce that understanding. Allegory, such as Saint Bernard writes in his *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, is not simply a way of arriving at the actual meaning of the Old Testament Scripture. It is, rather, a way of stimulating a desire – pursued within the context of a monastery, with its daily observance of liturgical hours – to enter fully and freely into the 'game' of eternal truth. The elaborate design of Dante's fiction in [canto 32](#) can be seen as an equivalent of this. Where so much of the *Commedia*, especially its political aspect, has been concerned to demonstrate the practical need for a contemporary understanding of God's purposes, this canto attempts to look back on history from the vantage point of eternity, and so reveal the currents and connections that made it. On that understanding, the canto is best read in a spirit of intellectual exuberance rather than with too much concern for the accuracy of Dante's dispositions.



There are two main points of orientation within the Rose. The first is the Virgin Mary, seated at its summit. In this respect, the canto may be read in conjunction with [canto 23](#), and as a preparation for the first phase of [canto 33](#), where the Virgin is directly addressed in Saint Bernard's prayer. The second line of orientation is the diametric division of the Rose into those who believed in Christ to come – which is to say, the prophets and heroes of the Jews as the chosen people of God – and those who believed in Christ having come, in the fullness of the Christian era. It is the second consideration that produces the most original and – some might say – most unpalatable aspects of Dante's thinking. As in *Inferno* 4 (representing Limbo), Dante, in reflecting on history, is concerned with the ways in which the unity of human nature through history may be asserted. It is part of Dante's Christian 'humanism' that he should. So, here as elsewhere, his understanding of the value of human traditions leads him to emphasize the ways in which the pre-Christian era formed the foundations of the Christian era. But there is no mention now of the pagan world, to which, in his representation of Virgil, Dante has previously given as much credence as he gives here to the Jewish precursors of Christian belief. Yet an answer to the question of the noble

pagan (which many will consider no answer at all) has already been given in [cantos 18–20](#). (See commentaries on these cantos.) And this answer is that the ultimate fate of each individual, from whatever era, lies in the hand of the God that created that individual, and – since the relationship between the Creator and every one of his creations is entirely singular – admits of no schematic or formulaic representation.

Indeed, Dante is now concerned with the meaning of predestination. In [canto 21](#) he was told that this question would not yield to human inquiry. The point is now reinforced by a strong emphasis on the apparent eccentricity of divine action, particularly in regard to the fate of children, who are evoked by a reference (sometimes seen as a deliberate attempt to evoke pathos) to the voices of children that echo in the central parts of the Rose ([46–8](#)). At [lines 70–72](#), Dante alludes to decisions as to divine favour which depend simply on the colour of a child's hair. To the eye that is rightly accustomed to Dante's rigorous rationality, this is bound to seem a capricious emphasis. Yet there are reasons for it. For if the poem is to be concerned with grace rather than human design, then the measure and distribution of favour must (if it is not to be constrained and reduced from love to justice) allow the ultimate mystery of God's utter freedom to prevail. Thus, at [lines 52–66](#) Dante uncompromisingly announces that the place of individuals in the Rose may be absolutely assured, but not by any merit or action of the human will. Rather, it is an effect of grace, which acts differently – for inscrutable reasons or no 'reason' at all – in producing differences between the standings of each of the blessed. All depends ([76–8](#)) on the perception of God's grace that was given to them as the foundation of their existence at the moment of their creation.

No one who has read [cantos 2–4](#), with their emphasis on the value of existential difference and the insufficiency of human conceptions of hierarchy, will fail to see the significance of Dante's argument here. Likewise, it will become apparent in [canto 33](#) that Dante's final entry into a state of grace, an individual creature ready at last to meet his Creator, will involve an abdication of that commitment to the powers of individual volition that has been an abiding characteristic of the travelling, inquisitive, heroic Dante. But this shift is also registered in the attention that Dante gives not only to the Virgin and Eve but also to a procession of the other Jewish mothers, who dominate the Rose and Dante's description of it at [lines 4–21](#). With these 'Hebrew women', as also in the providence with which they co-

operate, history ceases to be a matter of triumphs, achievements, ambitions and conclusions and becomes, rather, generative in character, a way of participating in the fullness of existence. It is this understanding which is brought to its highest in the contemplation of the Virgin that governs the canto from [line 84](#) onwards and extends into the opening phase of the final canto.

NOTES

- [7–12](#) Rachel was the second wife of Jacob (see Genesis 29). As a figure for the contemplation of the divine, Rachel had an important role to play in *Purgatorio* 27. Sara was the wife of Abraham and mother of Isaac (see Genesis 12: 5–20). Rebecca was Isaac's wife and Esau and Jacob's mother. (See Genesis 25:21). See also line 68 below. Judith was the Jewish heroine who beheaded Holofernes (see the apocryphal Book of Judith); Ruth was grand-mother of King David. David was at 'fault' for sending Uriah, the husband of his mistress Bathsheba, to his death in the forefront of the battle. (See 2 Samuel 11.) The '*Miserere mei*' is Psalm 51. (Compare with *Inferno* 2, where Dante depicts the chorus of heavenly ladies who initiate his journey through the other world.)
- [31–3](#) Saint John the Baptist, martyred two years before Christ's crucifixion, had to wait two years for redemption in Limbo.
- [67–9](#) The reference here is to Jacob and Esau, sons of Rebecca (see above) and Isaac (see *Genesis* 25: 21). Though these children were twins, God chose Jacob over Esau.
- [79–81](#) Circumcision was instituted as a profession of faith in the time of Abraham.
- [94–6](#) This refers to the Angel Gabriel. (Compare *Paradiso* 23: 103–5.) He is singing 'Hail Mary, full of grace'.
- [127–9](#) Saint John the Evangelist, credited with the Book of Revelation, speaks of the sufferings to be endured by the Church in the last days before the Second Coming. (Compare *Purgatorio* 32.)
- [130–32](#) The 'lord' referred to here is Moses, who guided his people from servitude in Egypt.
- [133](#) Anna or Anne is the mother of the Virgin Mary.
- [136–8](#) Lucia, or Saint Lucy, is Dante's patron. (Compare *Inferno* 2: 97 and *Purgatorio* 9: 52.)

[139–41](#) In his *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, Saint Bernard speaks of God’s wisdom as a skilful tailor.

CANTO 33

Saint Bernard prays on Dante’s behalf to the Virgin Mary. Dante ascends to the vision of God.

COMMENTARY

Did Dante see visions? Was he, in some sense, a mystic or a prophet? Does he seek to sway his reader with some personal understanding of a transcendent world? Or is it more fruitful to regard the *Commedia* – and the journey it describes – as an elaborate fiction, which draws upon a wide range of theological and contemplative doctrines in order to display above all, its author’s literary ambitions and powers of imagination? Is the *Commedia* a book of revelation or a labyrinth of subtle illusions?

These questions – to which critics have given many legitimate, though often competing answers – arise with particular force in regard to [canto 33](#). Yet this canto, in common with many other parts of the *Commedia*, tends to resist the imposition of any final answer, and even to question the desirability of such an answer, from both a literary and a Christian point of view. The rhetoric of the canto repeatedly emphasizes the inadequacy of the poet’s words in recording any ultimate experience of divinity. (See [lines 55–7, 67–75, 106–8, 121–3, 133–5](#).) And if, in its poetic concerns, the canto seeks to outdo the achievements of earlier literature, then it does so, sometimes with a melancholic inflection, by suggesting how all words and verses will flutter away, just as the leaves on which the Sybil of Virgil’s *Aeneid* 3: 443–50 once inscribed her prophecies ([64–6](#)). Dante’s own text rises not to some triumphant climax, but rather – in tones less of melancholy than of poised and illuminated realism – to a picture of how the poet, having unaccountably seen the God-head, is now at one remove from God: his point of arrival is not to be absorbed enthusiastically into God, but rather to take up once more his rightful place in the created order of the universe, his mind and intentions circling in harmony with the sun and the other stars. It might even be argued that the appropriate conclusion of Dante’s vision is that he should start his journey over again. Suppose that Dante truly had received a vision, he would

still need to return to the task of writing that vision out in appropriate narrative order. If this were a purely literary construct, the reader might be called here to reflect and cross-refer, gauging, say, the difference between the circlings of the universe and the constrictions of the dark wood, or admiring the engineering, so to speak, of a poem that can end in a simultaneously quiet yet dynamic mode.

No literary mind is likely to prefer finality of interpretation over the enrichments of ambiguity, suggestion and developing pattern. At the same time, no seriously religious argument would ever propose that a human being can, properly, construct a description of what God is. Two of Dante's most important authorities celebrated in [canto 10](#) insist on this. The first is Aquinas. It is his constant theme that 'we know God the better the more we realize that we do not know our creator' (David Burrell, *Faith and Freedom* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 114–15). Yet for Aquinas, as for Dante, such a position is to be seen as the basis of, rather than an impediment to, rational inquiry, since, in admitting the absolutely unknowable simplicity of God, our minds are impelled into ever greater activity:

There is no reason why our reason should not separately consider a variety of notes, and attribute them, each and all, to one simple being. We have to consider God from many points of view. Indeed, the simpler the being the greater and more manifest the powers we can see there: our multitudinous praises attest to God's supreme simplicity.

2 *Contra Gentiles* 14

The second authority is Saint Bonaventure, whose *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* (*Journey of the Mind towards God*) is sometimes taken to have provided Dante with a model for the notion of a spiritual journey. It is Bonaventure who recalls the illuminating brilliance of the darkness into which the mind must enter in contemplating God. In the final moments of its spiritual journey

our mind, accustomed as it is to the opaqueness in beings and the phantasms of visible things, appears to see nothing when it gazes upon the light of the highest being. It does not understand that this very darkness is the supreme illumination of our mind.

These principles, with their differing emphases, are as much part of Dante's religious experience in the final canto as they are throughout the *Paradiso*, and together they point to one of the main characteristics of the canto, that is, a certain clarity deriving from the rejection of delusive spiritual ambitions. Readers should not look here for that crescendo of sentiment which, loosely used, the word 'mystic' can sometimes incline one to expect. This canto is, in its own way, as disciplined and concentrated as every other part of the

Commedia, precisely because it acknowledges what can be known and said and what *cannot* be known or said, by a creature who acknowledges the existence of an infinite creator. Aquinas in particular encourages this understanding (see introduction, pp. xxxii-1) in his supremely rational investigation of the workings of God (as opposed to an irrational interest in God's unknowable nature). Thus the great cultural historian Ernst Curtius regarded the passage at [lines 85–93](#) – which speaks of the ‘book’ of the created universe – to be among the most successfully realized of any poetry in the European tradition. He locates the success of the passage in the scholastic precision with which Dante envisages a comprehensible and intellectually coherent universe.

Yet Dante's concerns are not identical to those of Aquinas and Bonaventure. He is a poet. Words, images and narrative forms – their potentialities, their histories, their suggestive power, and their limitations – are a salient feature of his consciousness, and can produce a density of texture which, at first sight, is out of keeping with the more obvious demands of Christian understanding. Thus, immediately following the lines that Curtius so admires (at [lines 94–6](#)), Dante suddenly introduces a verse that not only springs directly from his reading of classical literature – producing incongruous references to Neptune and Jason's Argosy – but still defeats the interpretative efforts of modern critics. The probable meaning of the verse is this: that in the one moment when Dante sees God, more truth and experience are contained than in the twenty-five centuries that have passed since the Argonauts – who mythologically were the first seafarers – amazed the god Neptune by crossing his hitherto untravelled ocean. Yet such a paraphrase does no justice at all to the imaginative complication of the passage: Dante who is *not* a god looks up to see the true God in the same way as Neptune, who is a *false* god, looks up to see the brilliant exploits of human heroes. Neptune is amazed by a shadow drifting in a sequential line across the water, seen from beneath; Dante is contemplating the miracle of a single intense point and progressively entering into that light. Gods and men are interchanged, flux and intense fixity contrasted, and at the heart of the verse, at [line 94](#), is the deeply ambiguous word ‘*letargo*’, which in Latin would have signified a sick sleep or lethargy but could also (as in the writings of Alain de Lille) mean ‘elevated rapture’. Is the unremembered reality a yawning gap, or is it still a source of ecstasy?

To T. S. Eliot, these haunting lines demonstrate the ‘combinative power’

of all true poetry. So a full analysis of them might also consider how Dante's reference to the Argosy here combines with previous references to Jason in the *Commedia*, in, for instance, *Inferno* 18 or *Paradiso* 2. Or else consider how Dante's frequent references to his own poetic journey as a sea voyage (see *Purgatorio* 1 and *Paradiso* 2) are reflected here in the mirror of poetic self-consciousness. There is more to say than this. Yet enough has been said to suggest how the passage might attract those readers who are primarily interested in effects of pure poetry or even virtuosic illusion. At the same time, the language of the passage, in particular its use of the word '*letargo*' – here translated as 'trauma' – is both classical and medical in register while also reflecting a strand in the religious discourse of the Middle Ages which embraces and cultivates paradox. Julian of Norwich, for instance, wished illness upon herself as the way to a deeper encounter with God's grace. Perhaps Dante's '*letargo*', though an illness in human terms, could also be the ground of his ultimate happiness, a yawning gap which reveals the abyss of truth. (Compare the treatment of memory in *Purgatorio* 33: 91–9.) A similar possibility arises at line 57. Memory is here said to be 'outraged' at the extremity of unrecoverable understanding. Yet the Italian '*oltraggio*' carries within it the word *oltre* – 'beyond' – as though violation could be the pathway to spiritual advance.

It is consistent with the unprecedented range of Dante's linguistic styles and registers that in [canto 33](#) his text should move so markedly between definition and suggestion. Yet in the closing stages of the canto there is one instance where ambiguity becomes a form of precision. At [line 113](#) the Italian word '*parvenza*' is employed (as it is in various forms at [lines 69](#), [116](#), [119](#), [128](#) and [131](#)) to indicate the presence and action of the divine. '*Parvenza*' can – and here most obviously does – mean a 'showing-forth'. Yet it can also mean an 'appearance', or even an illusion, as opposed to a reality. And it is entirely appropriate, in theological terms, that an unsettling equivocation should arise in this case. For God is *not* a reality in the sense that any other thing is a reality, since God is not a thing at all. Nor is God as creator a point of arrival but rather one of constant departure, especially from the grips of all human constructs. To know God is, precisely, to know this, and to be drawn further into the depths of existence by the art of illusion which creative existence will itself always generate. (Compare the positive value that Dante ascribes to the illusory effects of God's art in *Purgatorio* 10 and 12; see commentaries on these cantos.)

Such apparent paradoxes take a further turn when one recalls that for Dante (as, of course, for Aquinas and Bonaventure) God is Christ. In a Christian perspective, the ultimate mystery – which is also the core of all meaning – is that Christ as the Logos, or True Word and wisdom of God, was incarnate in the person of Jesus. Through Christ – and through the paradoxes of the Incarnation, Crucifixion and Resurrection – it is, after all, possible to know God. God, then, is known precisely through his mysterious but agonizingly real presence in human history. Dante's commitment to this understanding has been displayed in *Paradiso* 15–17, and his own passionate involvement in the political detail of history, as well as in the word-by-word processes of poetic composition, involves a greater emphasis on this aspect of Christian thought than is immediately discernible in the more specifically theological writings of Aquinas or Bonaventure. Thus, the most fundamental feature of Dante's narrative has been its depiction, canto by canto, day by day, of other historical human beings who, in the reciprocations of human discourse, may progressively practise – and not simply argue about – the meanings that are established by the incarnation of the Logos.

If Dante is a mystic, then he is so (like any passionate Christian) not in a search for transcendence alone but also in his unremitting attention to human history and human worth. For it is this attention – wholly mysterious, except in the perspective of a belief in Christ's Incarnation – that raises him above the evidence of worthlessness which his exile and his vision of Hell so obviously presented to him. It is thus appropriate that, against expectation, the final vision of [canto 33](#) should be a vision of 'our human features'. It is also consistent with this conclusion that the first third of the canto should be devoted to the Virgin Mary. At [canto 32](#), lines 85–7, Dante turned his eyes to look at 'that face resembling Christ/closer than all'. That such a family resemblance exists immediately emphasizes the particularity and physical reality of Christ's presence in history. It also emphasizes that, while God's appearance may flicker ungraspably before us, there is a face to which we may reliably turn in seeking him, the face of the Virgin Mary. (Compare *Paradiso* 31: 103–8.) Thus, though the parade's Xes that mark the opening lines of [canto 33](#) ('Virgin and mother, daughter of your son'), Mary is established as the '*termine fisso d'eterno consiglio*' – 'the point that truth eternally/is fixed upon'. She is the face to which the unknowable God is known to have turned both as Creator and as human child. She is the fixed point of reference both for God and for humanity.

In [canto 23](#), Dante emphasized that Mary, along with Beatrice, was the supreme example of how images, especially the image of the human being, may be ‘God-bearing’. The emphasis now falls on the dignity of the human being as displayed in the Virgin. The Mary whom Bernard addresses is no tremulously wilting figure, but one to whom the highest dignity and nobility are powerfully ascribed. (See [lines 4–6, 12, 19–21](#).) In imagery, too, there are no Madonna lilies (familiar from so much visual art, and present even in [canto 23](#)) but evocations, rather, of an energy that physically co-operates with the creative forces of the spirit, in fire, warmth and refreshment ([7–12](#)). The speech in some sense reflects the rhetorical ardour for which Saint Bernard’s writings were well known, as well as balance and steady concentration in its syntax, sonority of diction and majestic repetitions ([16–21](#)). But, before the insufficiencies of language are revealed in the final phases of the canto, its opening lines emphasize that there are at least two fundamental ways in which human language, in common with human dignity, can never fail. These lines represent an act, simultaneously, of prayer and of praise – both directed, as language properly must be, at another human person – in this case the Virgin Mary. It will be God, not she, who answers these prayers, when she in turn has prayed to God on Dante’s behalf. But in this progressive chain of petitions (compare *Inferno* 2.) Dante displays, as ever, his belief in the essentially communal character of human discourse ([37–9](#)). As to praise, since the *Vita nuova* the attitude of praise has been the essential principle of Dante’s poetics. This principle involves an acknowledgement that ultimate presences – whether God or the creatures of God – exist beyond our competence to encompass, yet proceeds in the pleasure that purely gratuitous action, as for instance spontaneous applause, will always elicit.

At the moment of meeting Beatrice in the Earthly Paradise, Dante depicted a certain gender shift, in which Beatrice became the source of power and of ‘vir-tue’ – of ‘manly’ strength, from the Latin root of the word ‘virtue’, ‘vir’ meaning ‘man’. Now, in the closely parallel conclusion to the *Paradiso*, a similar shift sees the Virgin become the summit of human worth, just as, correspondingly, humility becomes the ultimate source of elevation ([2](#)). It is consistent with this that, once the prayer to the Virgin is concluded, Dante – hitherto a man of action and a poet of vaunting ambition – should present himself in an attitude of utter passivity, to the point at which he returns to the condition of childishness (as he does in *Purgatory* 30). At the same time, it is worth comparing Dante’s representation of his own passivity here with one of

the most famous episodes of the *Commedia*, the meeting with Francesca in *Inferno* 5: 88–142. There are similarities. Driven by desire, Francesca puts down the book that she has been reading – *Galeotto* – and gives herself entirely to Paolo’s embrace, while Dante swoons in sympathy at her fate. In *Paradiso* 33, at [lines 85–90](#), Dante comes to contemplate the ‘book’ of universal order, yet, going beyond that penultimate vision, he sees the face of a person – God himself in this case – and again fades into incomprehension at that sight. But there the similarities end. For where *Inferno* 5 leaves Dante falling ‘as bodies fall, for dead’, the self-abandonment represented in *Paradiso* 33 is seen as the recovery – as in the re-discovery of childhood – of the strength and potentialities that derive from the source of being. This is not self-abandonment at all. On the contrary, Dante at every point is impelled here by ever sharper desire, and by the capacity – which is, for him, the core of human freedom – to move and change under the impetus of his intellectual volition. The paradox here is that such capacities, on which all moral absolutes in human relationships depend, are not, finally, the absolute condition at all. For God is utterly unchanging, complete, still and simple. And it is this stillness, as the object of desire, which creates freedom of movement in the creature. God’s love does not grip or possess the soul in the way that Francesca maintains she is ‘gripped’ by her love for Paolo. There is no battle of wills in *Paradiso* 33, but rather an effortless bringing to fruition.

In order to explore the nuances of this delicately poised condition, Dante, of course, continues to represent himself as a traveller now on the final stages of his journey. Yet nowhere in the *Commedia* is it less plausible than here to insist on a distinction between Dante the character and Dante the poet. The poet in his constant confessions of inadequacy mirrors at every point a moral condition that is explored in the progress of the Dante character, and, particularly at [lines 106–14](#), produces an exact verbal equivalent to the peculiar dynamics of the moral narrative. Here Dante speaks of how his eye becomes keener and stronger the more he looks at God, yet, in doing so, becomes progressively more childlike. Which is to say that Dante returns to the very simple desire for life, and is impelled into life (as any child is) by a power beyond himself. (Compare *Purgatorio* 30–33.) There is a hint of this in the use of the word ‘travagliava’ at [line 114](#), since the Italian here suggests – as does the English ‘travail’ – the pain and labour of childbirth. With this distinction, it is *Dante*, in his increasing appreciation of God, that gives birth to himself. Dante’s God creates by granting the ultimate freedom of self-

creation. And it is through his picture of the Dante character that the poet demonstrates this truth.

Yet in the same passage the poet's own text enacts an exactly comparable understanding. At [line 106](#) Dante had begun to emphasize the peculiar virtue of vernacular language in its simplest form, baby talk. The emphasis here on the significance of the language we learn at our mother's breast is consistent with Dante's linguistic theory as expressed in the *De Vulgari Eloquentia*. (See also commentaries on *Purgatorio* 21 and 22.) And elsewhere in the *Paradiso* (especially in [cantos 15–17](#) and in the meeting with Adam in [canto 26](#)) Dante has continued to demonstrate his continuing interest in the potentialities of the primitive vernacular. Now in the perspective of divine transcendence, all speech, even the most elevated, is seen to be neither more nor less than baby talk. Yet, by virtue of its very inadequacy, infant speech (itself a paradox) also carries a power of extreme suggestion. And a single phrase indicates how far Dante, as poet, avails himself of this power. This is the phrase printed in most editions of the *Commedia* as 'mutandom' io' and is here translated as 'me, changing mutely' ([114](#)). Dante is, as we have seen, changing in the light of God's stillness. But the implications of this are reflected, firstly, in the grammar of this phrase. The pronoun 'io' / 'I', which signifies the subject of a verb, the ego and identity impelling an action, is here slurred with, and disappears into, the action itself, designated by the gerund or participle 'mutando' – 'changing' – so that there is no self apart from the changes which that self suffers. Also in this slur is the object pronoun 'mi' – here part of a reflexive construction: 'changing myself'. Thus, as the *subject* 'io' is lost, so in its self-abandonment to change, it returns again as the *object* of its own action, configured now as both active and passive and also part of an unending self-transformation. (The gerund is technically an infinitive construction.) Nor is that all. For the word 'mut are' carries within it a similar suggestion of abnegation – in that, while 'mut are' means 'to change', it also carries with it the word 'muto', meaning 'silent'. (That is why the translation here introduces 'mutely'.) The passivity of silence and the activity of self-transformation are here reconciled in the ambiguity of Dante's suggestion. This is also true of the syntax of the *terzina*. On the surface, the passage must, most obviously, mean that Dante's sight gathers strength and value within itself ('in me guardando': 'as sight in me, yet looking on') the more he contemplates God. Yet from Dante's Italian (though not from the English translation) it is possible to argue that it is God

who is the subject of ‘looking’, and who is thus impelling Dante’s development – and even in some way, demonstrating his greater worth as Creator by doing so. The critic and theologian Vittorio Montemaggi notes a similarity between ‘*in me guardando*’ and the phrase that opens *Paradiso* 10 (*Guardando nel suo Figlio con l’Amore*), in which God, as Father, looks ‘into’ Christ – displaying his power in his love for the Logos who is also the human person of Jesus. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, one notes the phonetic properties of ‘*mutandom*’¹⁰ For here, beyond articulate meaning, there is a rhythmic substrate of continuing sonic presence, closely akin to that of a mantra. Dante’s verse is usually marked by a philosophically clear-headed articulation of meaning. Here, in the repetition of the ‘*m*’ – which was initiated at [line 108](#) by a reference to the ‘*mammella*’ (the ‘breast’) from which a child takes its ‘mum’s milk’, the soft mutterings and puckerings of the vernacular in its simplest form register the very state of childlikeness which constitutes the renewal of Dante’s strength. (The *Vita nuova*, recording Dante’s earliest experiences of love, is characterized throughout by a linguistic devotion to the letter ‘*m*’, as in ‘*amore*,’ ‘*tnorte*,’ ‘*memoria*’ – ‘love’, ‘death’ and ‘memory’.)

In keeping with the linguistic character of the canto, its narrative structure tends to embrace its own dissolution and so, far from maintaining the tension and command of climax and crises that appears at almost every point in Dante’s poem, draws attention to the gaps and interruptions in its narrative sequence. A recurrent word here is ‘*poco*’ – ‘little’. This, in some cases, registers the insufficiency of words, or points to how the ‘little’ that can be said will celebrate the unimaginable reality of God’s all. But here, as from the first canto of the *Inferno*, the word is also an indicator of that gradualness and concentration on minutiae which always marks the progress of Dante’s narrative. For the most part, this is a reflection of that leaden-footed discretion that Dante applauds through the mouth of Aquinas in [canto 13](#), line 112. Yet in [canto 33](#) the effect is more of lightness and deliquescence. Indeed, there are strange, though appropriate, similarities here with the very first moment of drama in the *Inferno* when Dante is driven little by little back to where the sun is silent by the ravaging she-wolf of avarice. For the conditions of desire and of avarice are not easy to tell apart (if they were, there would never have been sin), save that avarice, pursuing self-satisfaction, loses itself in itself, whereas desire loses itself in devotion to an object, constantly renewed, *beyond* itself.

The last moments of the *Paradiso* represent, therefore, not only a homecoming but also a renewal of exile in which the self loses all orientation. The book of the universe that appears to Dante at [lines 85–90](#) may be thought to replace and remedy that fluttering of Sybil's leaves to which Dante alludes at [line 66](#). And so it does. Divinely created things in the book of universal signs are more authoritative than the books that human beings write – hence Dante's constant attention to the detail of the world. Yet he finally goes beyond even this universal book, and beyond *things* as well, into a realm where reality resides, not in words or objects or even design, but in movements and relationship, in action rather than being. So, at [lines 115–17](#), Dante sees the perfected form of a three-fold rainbow arc. There is a wonderful appreciation here of 'being' in its most rarefied form – of light and colour as the most refined of all physical realities. There is also an appreciation of geometry – of that which some might hold to be the underlying form of all being. There is finally an allusion to the rainbow that came as a covenant between God and Noah. This covenant carried with it the assurance that the world, once created by God, was safe once again for human habitation and, equally, that the realities of this world could offer a reliable underpinning to human design. But even this moment of stability is only a preliminary to the moment of Dante's final vision, which disconcerts all measure and geometry, delivering him – and the reader – into a condition of pure action.

As far as human competence is concerned, it is as if the Flood had come again; and certain mystical writings might at this point have spoken of an overwhelming brightness, as if this were a return to the very moment of creation 'out of nothing'. Yet Dante's emphasis is somewhat different. This is certainly a return to the originary moment. But the poet's final emphasis, as always, is not upon the force of sublime phenomena but upon the responses – the capacities for action and passivity – of the human child. The final moment is thus a moment of recognition – a moment, that is, under the impetus of a human encounter, in which the past is summoned up to reveal the possibility of future relationship. Such moments of recognition have punctuated the whole *Commedia*, sometimes anticipating the concluding moment of the poem – as in Dante's meeting with Beatrice in *Purgatorio* 30 – sometimes, as in his meeting Brunetto Latini in *Inferno* 15, producing a parodic anti-type, where an appalling paralysis or frenzy arises at the point where action should have been renewed. Now, to see the human face of God

is a moment of utter simplicity, as if what Dante desires and has been seeking all along is the utterly familiar, the face that defines and makes possible all expression and speech from childhood on.

This very simplicity produces a simultaneous moment of ambiguity – or better say, of proliferation, of prolific ‘child-bearing’. Saint Paul speaks of our seeing God ‘face to face’. Recent theology and literary criticism, too, recalls, in parallel, the insistence placed by the rabbinical philosopher Emmanuel Levinas on the encounter of faces, which can be regarded as a metaphor for the originary moment of creation: face looking into face will refuse to kill the other, and by that refusal display its devotion to life. From this initial acknowledgement of reciprocity there derives the everyday repetition of ethical action in all our moments of regard or courtesy. (See David Ford, *Self and Salvation* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 17–72.) There is much in Dante’s position which is consistent with this, and it has been the mission and success of his poem to seek constantly the liberation of the conversations – and conversions – that fully express the ethical possibilities of the human being. In common with Levinas, Dante is concerned to make action rather than being the ground of existence. That said, however, the last lines of the *Paradiso* are characteristically tender towards the identity and even individuality of historical human beings, as Dante has always been in his praise of the existence of Beatrice or the Virgin Mary. The ‘other’ to whom Dante addresses himself is the other that we need to have in front of us if we are to hold any conversation at all. Yet now he sees God as an ‘other’, and in this case encounters an otherness that is like no other. God has no place in any spatial geometry or system of binary oppositions. She is as much within as He is beyond. (See Denys Turner, *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God* (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 154–68.) And to that extent, our singular identities exist, save that they are not our own but God’s – and are real identities precisely in being so. That is the reality that the human being cannot encompass but can only desire to encompass. It is this desire that now impels Dante, as a creature, to move in the created sphere with the sun and the other stars. And it is, evidently, the same desire which has impelled Dante as poet, throughout his historical life, and in the writing of his poem, to re-engage with, and seek to animate, the innumerable personages – most of them historical – that his poem invites us to encounter.

See commentary above.



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